Walking the Line

By: Aubretia Lycania

Old masks come back to haunt, and it’s time for the brothers to let one of the most important things go...time for a wedding, a funeral, a reunion, growing up. Sequel to Of Honor and Innocence and What Cannot Be Fixed.

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Prologue: Wonderings of a Life

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Description: Old masks come back to haunt, and it's time for the brothers to let one of the most important things go; time for a wedding, a funeral, a reunion, growing up. Sequel to Of Honor and Innocence and What Cannot Be Fixed .

Author's Notes: This IS the sequel to Of Honor and Innocence , and third in the trilogy begun with What Cannot Be Fixed , so if you haven't read either of these stories, you will need to go back and do so before proceeding, as you will be confused. I am sorry that they are to be found in what is apparently the *other* TMNT section... whatever. If you are curious, click on my profile link and you'll find them. As for those following me, thank you! As always, I will be referencing and keeping in continuity with the 2007 TMNT movie prequel comics from the notes of writer-director Kevin Munroe. I'd like to thank everyone who stuck with me through the two proceeding stories and have made it here to the third, and I hope for this to be the best of the three. Special thanks to Gadoken King, my think-tank pal—please also read his story, as his characterization of Leonardo has helped mine greatly and had a great influence. Please enjoy, and I really, truly do appreciate, and need, feedback, so all constructive criticism is welcome.

Disclaimer: If I owned these turtles, I would not live in the space the size of a third-world cottage with five other college-age girls. Raphael would have bitch-slapped them all with the business end of his sai by now.

Walking the Line

For Michelangelo, life with his brothers was a long stretch of existence that felt as though it would never end, though he often posited to himself—fearfully—how it might. If anyone would be left at

home while the others were gone, it would be he, remaining in the empty nest to care for Master Splinter, long into his twenties, while the others went on with whatever their lives might look like; if they decided to separate at all. Mikey held furtively onto the ideal that they would stick together—providing, of course, that his older brothers didn't kill each other.

He could imagine himself: staying at home, drawing comics for newspapers or small comic book companies, going out as a clown, selling freelance photographs under strange names, making people laugh. He'd stay with Master Splinter. That was a given. He knew he would grow in common sense, and be a good adult, content with life. Then he would hold down the fort until his brothers came back—Mikey, at least, understood that he was stuck with them, and there was no changing that.

He could imagine Donnie: earning degrees online and publishing under false names in scientific journals, giving the world all his crazy findings without a scrap of credit, operating out of cellars and secret labs until he grew old, a mad scientist, and come home again, to keep his brother company. Mikey could count on that much. Donatello would live to a ripe old age, even if he went half-insane—at least he'd be entertaining, an eccentric old bat. Mikey had even drawn a few cartoons of this to tick his brother off, though Donnie had later taped them up in his alcove, secretly fond of them. They were a good likeness; minus, of course, the fro of Einstein hair above the purple ninja mask.

He could imagine Leonardo: continuing to travel the world over his lifetime, mastering various martial arts and philosophies, studying in monasteries under his giant cloak, a ghost again, flitting through lands like a legend. He would grow old, and very wise; he would write, and paint, and do great things, without anyone ever knowing it was him. He would carry the world's weight, like Atlas, alongside his own burdens on his shoulders. He would then return, to home, and his brothers, as he had before, a wise old geezer, to chuckle at Donnie's eccentricities and write his memoirs.

The fear set in when he could not imagine Raphael, at any age beyond twenty-five. In fact, if Mikey could imagine a Raphael beyond twenty, he considered it hopeful. Perhaps it was because his brother would live, but always be young, somehow immortal, a force unto himself—perhaps this was just his view, baby brother, looking at his tough older sibling who couldn't possibly die. Or perhaps it was because he knew his brother, and knew the danger of the world, and knew that Raphael would be the first to take a blow—a deadly blow—for one of his brothers, one of his friends, or even a complete stranger. Mikey knew that he, Donnie, and Leo would be old together, and always have each other; he also feared they would also have grief, and that coldness, when Raphael's warmth left them. This was how a world could end.

But Mikey was the youngest. It was not in his sphere or his power to stop any of this—he could only watch, and wonder, and keep it to himself, and enjoy his life as it was, so that one day he would have something fond in his heart to miss. He practiced shinaii with Raph and their little refugee, Lizzie, and laughed, and joked, and made them smile, led them not to think of any of these things. These things that Mikey thought of now, ever since walking forward in that sewer, and looking down at the murdered body of a woman. A little girl's mother. A little girl who had been protected, and had to watch her mother die—powerless.

This was the specter. This was the power. This was the mighty force he was up against, that Mikey had never before known. He suspected his brothers had—Leonardo and Raphael—by those haunted looks that sometimes wandered into their eyes, when the TV came on, and murders, muggings, rapes, overseas genocide, warfare, and corporate backstabbing appeared on the news. That weight of the world they kept away from their youngest brother so charitably, that Mikey sometimes tried to find ways of relieving them of—jokes, and laughter, and distraction. He wished he could make things better, make them little kids again, make his brothers more like himself. He did not realize that even that self had been changing, altering, since looking on that still, cold body. Something was

slipping, and there was no foreseeable way of holding onto it. But he was still Mikey, each day when he woke up and each day when he went to sleep, never worrying too much at a time. He never gave himself that time.

Himself, against the specter, with his brother's faces in its hands. He wondered what a clown could really do against that power—sometimes, before he slept. Dreams of painted masks turned from comedy to tragic, broken glass—ghosts, clowns, marionettes—and the dark. Always the dark.

Doers and Thinkers

Mikey crouched in the back of the van as April drove him back to the warehouse from a kid's bat mitzvah, and took off the Cowabunga Carl head with relief. "Man, that thing got hot today. So, April—how's, like, the plannin' going an' all?"

April smiled at him in the mirror. "Not much to plan, really. I've been holding off on the dress, and there's no force on this earth that could persuade Casey to look at a tux so early, so there hasn't been much. How about you guys? Is Raph's shell healing up alright?"

Mikey shrugged and grinned. "He still goes ballistic if you touch it, but Donnie's always fixing some part—ya know, bein' a perfectionist an' all. I just throw lots a' spitballs at it from somewhere high, where Donnie won't let 'im go up to get me."

"Mikey…" April shook her head. " *Raph* is going to *murder* you when he's all healed up, you know. How about Leo? He was infected last I was there."

"Aw, he's fine, just had a fever," Mikey said, not mentioning his brothers' altercation or the subsequent events. "Raph took care of him."

"Really?" April asked, an eyebrow raised. "Our Mr. Tough Guy played nursemaid?"

"I know, right? Leo an' Donnie won't let me make fun of him for it, an' I shouldn't in fronta' Lizzie, so it's cool. Teasing is a dish best served, uh… cold."

"That's revenge, Mikey," April laughed. She then looked in the mirror at him, seriously. "Uh, Mikey? Are Donnie and Leo okay? I noticed they seemed a little strange around each other the other day."

"Well… Donnie's been doin' the budgets an' stuff for a long time, and the people on that hotline a' his are really rude, an' he never has enough time for all his experiments in between fixin' stuff and fixin' *us* , an' I think it's just really wearin' on him. Raph took part of the budget off his hands, though, and Leo helps all three of us, so I guess it's easier. I don't think they really know who's actually in charge anymore."

April shrugged. "You're big boys—does anyone have to be in charge at all?"

"Dude, have you *been* to our place? Someone's *always* in charge. Master Splinter or Leo. Donnie's havin' trouble 'cuz he had so much to do while Leo was gone, and he's, like, not givin' it up *now* ."

April smiled at him; he sounded the same, yet his observations seemed so much older. Maybe it was because she never caught him without his brothers around except on these short rides to and from gigs. Perhaps because he didn't want them to know he might think about them, that he might be right, that he might be growing up. She found it adorable.

"Speaking of Splinter, I mentioned to Donnie my trip to Japan—though, I'm not so sure he heard me. I could probably find a way to bring Splinter back with me, if I can get in contact with him."

Mikey almost did a flip in the back of the van, and April swerved abruptly from surprise when she heard him hit the ceiling.

"That's AWESOME! When're you goin'? Can you seriously?"

" *If* I can contact him," she said, happily.

Mikey sobered slightly. "Well… if there's any way, Leo'll know. Want me t' tell him? Or you stayin' for dinner?"

April shook her head. "Have him call me—Casey and I are having a night. And besides… I've hit my pizza/ Mexican/ Chinese take-out

quota for the month, thank you."

"Whoa, sis," Mikey scoffed. "It's only the fifth!"

"I *know* ," April drew out, looking at him in the mirror pointedly. She deflated the Carl head on the roof, and hit the clicker for the left side of the warehouse. The other side was open, and Casey was working on a motorcycle with his shirt off in the heat.

"What's up, babe?" he called, as she went to let Mikey out of the back. "Hey, Mikester! Tell your brother he's got a nasty one on his hands tonight I'm leavin' especially for him!" He pointed to an atrocious, squat pink moped that looked like the personal property of a 200-pound Barbie doll, with the entire steering column curving back in on itself.

Mikey flinched. "Aw, man. It's like the retarded child of the Hell's Angels and Spottie Dottie threw up, and that was *it* ! What's the lady look like?"

Casey laughed, working on some grape Big League Chew, while April folded her arms. "Like a hockey player I used to know—after a puck paralyzed his face control, know what I'm sayin'?"

Mikey got his duffle bag and his skateboard to start home. "I'll tell Raph and Leo, but don't be surprised if they've filled the place with, like, carbon monoxide or somethin' for ya by tomorrow mornin'."

Casey shrugged, grease rag in hand, and April refused to hug him. Mikey thanked April and jumped into the sewers, for the crazy ride to the den.

"EUREKA!"

"Donnie, for the *last* time, I'm trying to meditate! I don't *care* what else you discovered from those decomposing samples of yours!"

"Will *both* a' ya shut up!" came a voice from the bunk room. "I'm tryin' to sleep, for cryin' out loud!"

"Maybe if you didn't stay *up* all night, Raphael"—Donnie started.

"And when else is he gonna work?" Leo shot back, from the training room. "One more peep, Donnie, and I might just test my double spinning dragon kick on *you* !"

"Throw one in for me, Leo!" Raph tossed back in from the bunks. "Make sure you get 'im in the voicebox!"

Mikey took a deep breath, as though smelling coffee in the morning. It just wasn't home until he could hear his older brothers threatening each other's lives.

"Hey, guys! I brought back leftover pizza!" Mikey called, announcing his presence. With a disturbing immediacy that rivaled that of the instant burrito, Donnie appeared out of the darkness of his alcove, Leo appeared from the training room, and Raph appeared on the overlooking second floor, still wrapped in his blanket.

" *Where* ?" all three of them said at once, and Mikey grinned. He extracted a box from his duffle bag and set in on the kitchen table for his brothers to ravish, while watching Lizzie follow Leo out of the training room, looking bored; apparently, Leo had been attempting to teach her to meditate. They all sat in the kitchen, attacking leftovers and chips, as though they'd been waiting expressly for Mikey to return before they ate any lunch.

Donnie smiled over his pizza. "You're my hero, Mikey."

"I hope you washed your hands after handling those samples, Donatello," Leo lectured.

Raph shuddered. "Guys, please—so not a food conversation here."

Mikey was bouncing to announce his news, but he had to heckle Raph first.

"Oh, yeah, Raphi—Casey told me to tell ya that he's got a *special* bike for you to work on tonight!"

Raph looked at him skeptically. "Yeah? What kinda *special* ? That never sounds good comin' from Casey Jones."

"I'll give you a hint," Mikey went on, almost wheezing to think of the terrible moped. "It's starts with a *p* and ends with an *ink* ."

"Definitely not a food conversation," Leo echoed, shaking his head and regretting his promise to help Raph in the shop until Splinter came home. "We'll have to throw in a free paint job, Raph. Baby puke green."

Raph held out his hands, as though asking the gods of motorcycles for divine assistance. "Why? Why must innocent bikes be painted such horrible colors? An' all after that guy who brought in his ATV 'cuz his son pissed in the fuel tank…"

"Would you believe me if I said I was coming down with a sudden flu?" Leo asked him, grinning wryly.

Donnie shook his pizza at Leo. "You can't play hooky unless you've earned it with a good acting job! And you just don't have the practice with playing sick that the rest of us do."

"That's because I never played sick, you bunch of fakers!" Leo said, folding his arms. "I seem to recall the lot of you watching *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* for tips."

"Yeah—an' you always told Master Splinter on us, too," Raph scoffed. He looked at Lizzie, who had appeared at his elbow with a handful of chips. "How's meditatin' goin'?"

She gave him a serious-faced thumbs down. Leo put his head in his hands. "I think she'd rather be hitting something with a stick than finding inner peace. Reminds me of a turtle or two."

Mikey and Raph grinned as though this were a good thing, and their older brothers didn't bother to lecture. After all, they were siblings, not miracle workers. Mikey made a fake drumroll on the table.

"Okay—now for the bigtime, super awesome fantabulistic news!" he announced, with as much pomp as possible. "April's goin' to Japan, and she wants to bring Splinter back with her!"

Raph perked up, smiling. "What? Seriously? *Wicked* !"

Donnie and Leo exchanged glances.

"Uh, I hate to pop your bubble, Mikey," Donnie started, rubbing the top of his head, "but April already told me that. I didn't make a big deal because I hadn't heard of any way of contacting him; and then I confirmed with Leo"—

Leo shook his head. "Nothing. It's one of those 'don't call me, I'll call you' kinda things. And we haven't heard from him once since he left. And besides—he probably hasn't even reached Japan yet, let alone paid respects to Master Yoshi and Shen- *sama* . He's traveling on lots of freighter ships, Mikey, in a very indirect route—it'll take April less than a day to get there, and she'll only be there for three. I don't think she'll be able to do it. Don and me would've told you guys if it was possible, believe me. We didn't want to get your hopes up. I'm sorry."

Raph folded his arms, and silently went back to his pizza; Mikey's face fell.

"Oh… well, maybe if we just sent a letter ahead…?"

Donnie watched him with a mixture of compassion and pity. "Look, Mikey, we all miss Master Splinter. And we'd all do whatever it took

to bring him back more quickly—but he's been stuck with us for sixteen years. Maybe he needs a break, too, you know? We've got to trust him to do what he needs to do and come back in his own time—alright?"

Leo patted Mikey's hand. "If we hear from him before April leaves, I'll run the option right by him, okay, Mikey?"

Mikey stared at the table. "Whatever," he said weakly, trying not to visibly pout. His spirits had dropped instantaneously.

Donnie chuckled. "Watch out, Mikey, before you grow horns and turn into the grouchy Raph-monster."

Raph reached over and punched Donatello in the arm. His stitches were out and the lower slash, dealt him by a metallic, robot version of the Shredder, was healing better than Donatello had expected. The higher slash, however, moving at an angle over Raph's eyes and which hadn't needed stitches, was lingering—it had split open several times due to its bearer's extreme facial expressions, to the point where Donnie had threatened botoxing his brother just to get the thing healed. Thankfully, though, as the physical effects of disfigurement receded, so did the psychological effects, and Raph had begun to act normal again… or as normal as he usually acted, anyways. Mikey hadn't yet started making fun of his older brother for the slashes, as they truly bothered him more than his cracked shell did—most likely because they had been so random, so easily avoided and uncalculated, while his shell had been damaged due to his own choice to protect Leonardo. More to the point, Raph's shell had already been cracked once before, and he was used to it; but until this point his sai had successfully protected his face from harm.

Leonardo's slashes were healing badly; Donatello had had to stitch them a second time after he'd thought they were progressing and found sand granules creating areas of festering bacteria inside his shoulder; whatever the *youkai* was, it had faced opponents before and hadn't been cleaned in the interim. Donnie had studied the blades after removing them from Raph's shell, to find any number of

bacteria cultures on its surface, as well as the obvious detritus of rust, sand, shell fragments, and blood, not all of it his brothers'. He thanked whatever powers that be that Raphael had taken no infection and counted their victories where he could find them—Leo hadn't gotten tetanus, at the very least. Donatello felt also a vague disgust with what he saw that he found hard to explain; the Foot clan had, at the very least, fought them before with clean weaponry. To fight dirty was one thing—but to fight *with* dirt was just repulsive. He wondered at corruption in Karai's underlings, or that this was just an early death knell for the powerful Foot. Between their badly wrought meeting with Karai, the belladonna and wild cherry shuriken, the murder of Lizzie's mother, a Ms. Daphne Roberts, and the brackish nature of their principal weapon, even when placed next to the Foot's former warehouse and junkyard incarnations, everything seemed irksome to Donatello. He kept a distance from it for now, however, continuing to make observations and gather data. He would hand it over to Leo if he needed to.

"So," Raph started, after punching his brother, "an' I know I'm gonna regret askin' this, but what were you eureka-in' about just a minute ago, ya mad genius?"

Donnie perked up, while Mikey rolled his eyes. Time for another long blah-blah-blah session that he wouldn't understand a word of.

"Well, it's tentative, but judging from what I've seen in these lymphocytes, a possible cure for cancer," Donnie said, unexpectedly shortly. "They've been radiated to a hyper-sensitive, intelligent state—they could fight almost anything, and what's more is that they know *what* to fight much better than the normal human immune response does. From what I saw in one sample, they were in the process of eating a small development of benign neoplasms that would normally grow into possibly malignant tumors. They would then metabolize these out-of-place cells and split to create more of themselves, and replace all normal lymphocytes her body produced."

Lizzie listened to him with attentive eyes, apparently not knowing who Donnie was talking about, and the turtles were blessedly aware of it.

"Barring what any of that actually means, how could you even tell?" Leo asked, his arms folded. It seemed so wrong and so irreverent for Donatello to be this excited about the remains of a dead woman who left an orphaned child in their care.

"Easy," Donnie shrugged. "All the cells are in various stages of mitosis or phagocytosis. I can see the entire chain just by focusing on twelve cells—like a set of slides. I want to see if I can extract their DNA and insert them into living host cells to create an active culture. Then I might catch a few rats and"—

"Not a chance, Donnie," Leo said sternly. "We can't have sewer rats in here with Lizzie around. She could get real sick."

"Leo—this isn't some pet project on improving the beer hat or something—it's a cure for *cancer* !" Donnie protested.

Leo pointed a finger. "First of all, I think you're getting carried away. Second of all, if it's that important, you'll do it right and find a cleaner animal. Send Mikey up for some pet store mice or something. Third of all, we have a very pressing priority in figuring out how to keep Lizzie safe from the Foot for the long term, and that's where I need to see your energy spent. Understood?"

"Yeah, and hey, man," Raph said, lightly, "it's not like the cure's goin' anywhere, right?"

Donatello stood up, displacing his anger. "They're *decomposing* , Raph! And do you have any idea how many people die of cancer every *day* ? Every second counts!"

Raph, surprised, shot back. "Yeah, an' let's say you *found* a cure, huh? How would you get it out there? You haven't got a single credential to your name—heck, you may as well not even *have* a

name—so who would take you seriously? And say ya gave the idea t' some scientist an' the guy runs with—no one'll ever know it was you! You're tellin' me it wouldn't even bother ya?"

"This coming from Mr. Save-the-world-behind-a-mask himself!" Donnie laughed, derisively. "How selfish would I have to *be* ? Malignant neoplasms are one of the top three killers in the world—I'd do whatever I had to in order to get the cure out there!" He pounded the table, then retreated to his alcove.

"Sheesh—bite my head off, why doncha?" Raph muttered, leaning back in his chair with arms folded. "What's eatin' *him* ? He's never been gung-ho 'bout cancer or whatever before."

Leo sat very still. "His makeshift cooling unit isn't keeping the samples well-preserved. And I won't let him use the fridge for dead body parts."

"Oh," Raph said, standing. "Why didn't 'e say so?" He ruffled Lizzie's hair as she started following Mikey to the training room for shinaii practice, and moved towards the den entrance.

"Where are you going?" Leo asked, now alone at the table.

"For a little stroll."

Raphael returned some time later with a large black box on his wide shoulders, and clunked it down just outside Donnie's alcove. Donnie, who was intent at a microscope, didn't look up.

"I'm not fixing anything right now, Raphael—you're a decent mechanic; do it yourself."

"Already have," Raph said with his tough, low voice, betraying nothing but a small smile. "When Casey and I took over our half a' the warehouse, we found some junk and piled it in the corner. I cleaned the thing out, fixed th' door, the lockin' mechanism, and the

fan—but I'm just not familiar with the workin's of old mini-fridges, y'know?"

Donnie, who had his large goggles on, turned suddenly to see a smiling Raph, and the small black fridge at his feet. "Oh," he said, awkwardly and a little sheepishly. "I… Here, come in."

Raph smirked and heaved the fridge back on his shoulders, to get it into the alcove, and Donnie scratched his chin as he examined its insides.

"You did good work on the fan—from the looks of it, the motor just needs a new belt and some coolant and it should run great. I've got something in my box, I'm sure… The door's been fixed well, too—I can see where you welded the cross-piece here back into place…"

Raph shrugged. "Just takes some elbow grease, is all. Well, I guess it's yours then, Don." He began to leave the alcove casually.

Donatello flipped his goggles up off his eyes. "You-you're sure? I can really have it?"

Raphael turned to him and grinned. "What the hell would I do with it? Sure wouldn't be curin' cancer, I can tell ya that much. Enjoy it, ya mad genius."

Donnie beamed and hugged the small, bulky fridge. "Thanks, little bro!" he called after him, receiving a dismissive wave behind as Raph wandered up and back to bed.

Steel Trap

Raphael never told anyone how much he loved the sound of their household during the day, when he woke up in the evenings. His was a house full of brothers, and always loud, as it had been growing up; having gone through a year of silence, he suddenly heard it again, anew and fresh, no longer white noise but something he could discern. At around four or five, Mikey would be returning from his afternoon gigs; he would blast into the den again, and the sound of his skateboard would roll off until Raph could hear it hit the pipe under the bunk room. The TV would have already been on, either from Master Splinter watching his soap operas in the old days, or now from Casey dropping in for a break from the shop, from Donnie needing a breather from phone calls, or Leonardo and Lizzie camping out after training for a long while.

He loved the hum of the commercials through the walls, and loved even more shouting for them to turn the damn thing down, knowing they were only going to turn it up. He would shuffle his face further into his pillow, his back to the solar generator, almost aware of the heat of the day through all those chill sewer layers, and smile, aware of the blankets under him and the familiarity of the sounds and objects all around him. Donnie's voice coming through the floor, advising customers on the hotline or talking to Mikey through the Cowabunga Carl surveillance head relay—the ding of the microwave—the smell of popcorn and coffee and instant pizza and marshmallows. The sound of Leonardo, cleaning around the den, occasionally chanting *Namu Amida Butsu* in the Pure Land Buddhist fashion or purifying the training room with salt, to Donnie's subtle disapproval; Leo's hands making steady, easy sounds as they buried themselves in the punching bag, or as he flipped over the bamboo poles for balance training, or his voice instructing Lizzie in stillness and breathing, all floating up through the walls to Raphael.

Raph would often stay in his bunk awake for a while, waiting to see who would come in and dare to wake him up, and how they would

try. Usually, it was Mikey, just after his last gig, who would start beating Raph over the head with his stuffed Panda bear or just jumping in and acting annoying until his brother finally flipped off his bunk and started chasing after to administer a good beating. Occasionally it was Donnie, gentler, coming in to ask Raph if he needed a painkiller for his shell (though always receiving an answer in the negative) and reminding him that Mikey was getting hungry. And thus Raph would roll out of bed to get to his part of the household responsibilities—training with Lizzie, clipping coupons for pizza and groceries, making lists, and figuring out what everyone wanted for dinner, before getting his shell up to the shop. Leo would have taken his own sleeping time in shifts with Raph, and be there to help him by midnight. And then the cycle of sounds would start again—all coming back to those few moments Raph looked forward to—the sounds that both accompanied him as he went to sleep and awoke him too.

Once or twice, if Raph slept too long, it would be Leo—the only person who knew that his brother actually waited for someone to come in, out of sheer curiosity; he would stand below Raph's bunk, arms crossed, waiting, until Raphael, unnerved by the presence, would ask:

"Leo?"

"Getting out of bed sometime this month, you ninja delinquent?" Leo would ask, audibly amused, and Raph would roll out of his bunk, landing in front of him. They both still wore the handcuffs, in silent agreement, still chained together, beyond either of their collective wills.

Today, Raphael waited, drifting back to sleep listening to afternoon sounds in the den and waking up occasionally, floating between two worlds. This was his stillness—this, and polishing the Nightwatcher bike. He was never one to sit cross-legged in the big, open training room and meditate, as Leo could. He found it in small pockets of time, when no one would suspect him of it. He didn't know why it had to be such a great secret; but it did. He had stopped hating Leo

when his brother seemed to know; when they were small, they had known everything about each other. They could finish sentences as they rolled out of the other's mouth and mind, or trade places and try to confuse everyone about their identities, making their sensei smile. Raph had always been the one to build forts, to sleep with his face close to the wall, to hide in narrow pipes—while all along wishing for the world above, for open air and people and noise—he listened to the rumble of the subway, the hum of his brother's voices, the sounds of the den, the buzz from the human realm far above him, and loved it with all his heart. He loved what Leo must have seen, as he traveled the world, and tried to reach out and touch it over the great divide they had been driven between themselves, all while facing the wall—trapping himself, he sometimes thought.

Today, Raphael waited, and realized he had woken up far earlier than usual, when he at last rolled over and looked at Donatello's clock. It was two in the afternoon, and he usually got up around five; Mikey wasn't yet home from his next gig, and he himself had only gone back to sleep after fixing the fridge for Donnie an hour earlier. After some time, he realized why it was: the den was far quieter than usual. Donnie was on the hotline and the TV was silent; Leonardo was training methodically and rhythmically below him; the bunk shook, as of someone climbing the ladder, which none of them ever did. Raphael looked at the foot of the bed and found Lizzie's head coming over the side, to sit quietly on the blankets watching him. Raph sat up, putting his arms on his bent knees.

"Hey, kiddo—what's the haps? Why aren't ya trainin' with Leo?"

She blinked with that ever-present dead serious look on her face. "Raphi, worried. 'Bout my mom."

Raph remained silent for a moment, squinting at her. "Uh, Lizzie… y'know I hate askin' ya questions—but you *do* know what happened, right? You saw it? Ya don't have to tell me—just say you know."

Lizzie pursed her lips. "They'll want me dead if I tell. But I'm not iron like mom." She was whispering, as though the walls might be

listening. Raph leaned closer.

"They'll kill you whether you tell or not, Lizzie. That's the truth… I'm not gonna make ya tell me if you don't wanna—but I have to make sure ya *understand* ."

Lizzie considered him. "They hit her… and she fell down. And you took me away. But she's probably better by now. She always is."

Raph felt a little disturbed that her conversation had improved so much, and he didn't know why. She normally never spoke such a large amount, in so many complete sentences—it was the equivalent of a panic attack by her standards.

"Lizzie… sometimes when people get hit, they can't get back up again."

The little girl shook her red head, soberly. "Not mom. Not anymore." Then she tapped her temples. "Wish I could show them to you, Raphi."

Raphael felt a slight warm inclination towards her, and the images that must be stored within her mind that she could remember but not understand.

"Y'know, Liz… Mikey likes to draw. Maybe if there's a lot up there, that ya need to do something with—maybe he could show ya how?"

She shook her head fiercely. "Can't—they'll want me dead. Like they wanted mom dead. But I remember all her moves."

Raph cocked his head. "Your mom has moves—like, martial arts moves? What me and my brothers do sometimes?"

"No—not mom. The lady's moves, with the big sword, like Leo's but longer. And the red and black mask. She hit my mom."

Raphael froze suddenly, his blood turning to ice. In his mind, there had been something almost excusable about ordering an impersonal

killing, for someone who ran an organization like the Foot—but for Karai to walk into the sewers and see this mother and kill her without mercy, leaving the child there unknown and then pursue that child ruthlessly as well… it was not something he knew how to deal with.

"You don't wanna tell Leo any a' that?" he asked, resigned. She shook her head.

"It bothers him. The crack on your back, and what happened to your face," Lizzie said, with wide, serious eyes, and no inflection in her voice. "You won't get better the way my mom can. He won't either."

Raphael took a deep breath. "Look, Lizzie… I don't know how I can say this—but your mom's not gettin' better. Not this time. Not ever again."

Lizzie frowned. "We should go to the place below the old bank building. That's where me and mom meet back up. Then you'll see."

Raphael did not want to see her face when that mother didn't return; but telling her wouldn't make any difference. He didn't argue, but rolled off his bunk and lifted her down with him.

"We'll tell my bros and go tonight, okay?" He still had the tiny girl, with that open serious face, in his arms when he said it, and she watched him steadily.

"It's true, though? They would want me dead even if I drew pictures?"

Raph tried to separate himself from it, from the horrible truth and injustice of it, telling this little girl of those disgusting realities of the world that he wished he'd never known himself. He nodded, grimly, and watched her purse her lips in concentration.

"I'll draw them for Donnie. He liked the one Mikey drew for him."

Raph smiled bemusedly. "I'm sure he'll love 'em—an' if they're what my gut says they are, I wouldn't know what to do with 'em, kiddo."

By the time Mikey came home and Leo at last came into the den from training, drenched in sweat, Lizzie had covered the kitchen table with sheets filled top-to-bottom in seemingly unconnected lines, shapes, diagrams, numbers, letters, and grids. Raph stood with a cup of coffee, overseeing the thing transfixed by what greeted his vision. Leonardo glanced at the scene on his way to the shower, sending a cursory, questioning look at Raphael, who smiled, a strange light in his eyes.

Mikey exploded in as usual and looked at his brothers, surprised. "Whoa—you're both awake? Hey, Liz, watcha drawin'?"

Raph nodded as Lizzie continued, as in a trance. He tapped his head in the same cryptic fashion that the little girl had before.

"Has Donnie seen these?" Leo asked, picking up a piece of paper. "I can't make head nor tail of it. Looks like calculus—I didn't know she could do math like this."

Raphael snickered. "She's not *doin* ' any of it. She's copyin' it from her brain—this is all from somethin' she saw. It's what Karai's after—because the lab was blown to pieces, and she still doesn't know what was goin' on there. An' if she finds out about this, she's gonna wanna get rid a' Lizzie, too."

Mikey scratched his head. "How can ya tell, Raphi? It's like a huge puzzle to me—I'm not even sure how you got her to, like, draw all this."

"It makes sense of you watch 'em in order—I've been standin' here fer the last two hours, watchin' from page one to what she's workin' on now. It's like seein' somethin' built from the smallest bit to the biggest—like schematics t' the bolts t' the Harley."

"You can actually follow it?" Leo asked, folding his arms.

"If ya think like Lizzie, ya can. The world's like a series a' pictures to her. Either she takes lots, or just a couple; sometimes she remembers things like she's lookin' at 'em; other times, she can choose *not* to remember 'em at all."

"Uh, hey, Lizzie," Mikey said, tentatively. "What're ya drawin' for, huh?"

"For Donnie," she responded, distantly, intent on getting everything she possibly could down on paper.

"Donnie!" Leo called. "Lizzie's got something for you! I suggest you come look!"

"Not now, Leo, the new cells are incubating and dividing at an incredible rate!" came Donnie's distracted voice. "I'll be able to introduce them to host bodies soon!"

Raphael growled and shoved one of the labyrinthine pages in front of Donnie's nose, coming directly between his brother and the microscope.

"What, brainiac, you don't wanna know how the jerks did it?"

Donnie's eyes grew, if possible, even larger behind his goggles; he grabbed the paper and trotted out of his alcove, looking at Lizzie and the table littered with papers.

"She can—she did this?" He then looked at Raph. "How'd you know what this was, Raphael?"

Raph folded his arms. "I only been livin' with *you* for the last sixteen years or so, Don. I know what your stupid calculus looks like."

Donnie made a frustrated sound. "As far as you and Lizzie are concerned, this could be *any* calculus and *any* set of grids and pictures—how the hell did you *know* it was the schematics?" He rifled through the pictures like a madman, his eyes rapidly placing

them into some order. Lizzie smiled at him, and went back to drawing.

Raph almost laughed. "She's ten, man, and her mom was a mutant —what the hell else *would* it be?"

Donatello now had twenty pages spread out on the table in a five-by-four grid, and a larger picture—that of an arm, made up of lines, charts, and equations—was coming into focus. "You may be simple, brother, but I love your logic," Donnie said, distracted, and Raph punched him in the shoulder. Leo smacked Donatello with the flat side of his sword from across the table. "Ow, *Leo* !"

"Donatello, don't call your brother simple," Leo said, matter-of-factly.

Mikey snickered. "Someone sounds like Master Splinter. Don't make Leo ground you, Donnie!"

Raph rolled his eyes. "Good ol' Daddy's boy here t' rescue me."

"I'm gonna have to scan these in and make a composite," Donnie said, ignoring his brother and gathering up sheets; he took a step towards his alcove before doubling back and ruffling Lizzie's hair. "You are the single-most amazing kid I've ever met!"

Raph stopped him. "Wait a second, Don. Ya know what all this means, right?"

Donnie turned around squinting, still distracted by the thrill of discovery.

"It means," Leo said, beside Lizzie, "that what Lizzie knows could get her captured and killed. If the Foot wanted the experiment gone, they'll want her gone too— *if* they know how perfect her memory is."

"They probably do," Raph said, folding his arms. "How much you wanna bet Karai was lying with that worried angle a' hers, actin' like Lizzie might be an experiment too?"

Leo sighed. "There's no point getting in this debate with you, Raphael—I'd prefer to think she wasn't lying, but either way, it remains to be seen."

Raph came forward. "Yeah… that's the thing I need to ask you guys 'bout. Lizzie says"—

Lizzie stopped drawing and looked up, as to pause him. Mikey's eyes grew big as she started talking.

"Mom heals real quick—and there's a spot we meet back up at if she and I get split up. I gotta go there. She'll like you, Mikey. I promise she won't be scared."

Michelangelo looked wordlessly up at Raph, who shrugged almost imperceptibly; Leo watched the girl concernedly, and glanced at Donatello, who'd done the autopsy and now came close to the table, at a loss.

"Elizabeth—your mother… well… didn't Raphael explain this to you?"

"I tried," Raph said, gruff and sad, while not making eye contact.

"Raphi thinks mom's dead. Most people would be—but she's iron, really strong. Never stays down long," Lizzie said, bright yet serious.

Donatello attempted to suppress the situation with a hand gesture, not sure what in it he was suppressing. "Look, Liz—I did a lot of… *science* stuff, and I can assure you"—

"Donnie," Leo started, gently, "maybe the best way to do this would be to go and just see what we see, huh?"

Interlude: Tenders of Pigeons

For Donatello, life with his brothers was a set of equations, given catalyst in insignificant events he often had trouble locating; yet the shell, the equations themselves, remained.

Donatello did, however, remember the day he began his conscious life; until then, he and Michelangelo had always been close brothers by a matter of default, because Leo and Raph were, until their preteens, practically sutured together, and even after then, remained a set bound by loathing. Donnie never really had anything to say to Raph and he and Leo had few reasons to disagree, but he always managed to have fun with Mikey, as ridiculous as his little brother's antics seemed. He was like a bloodhound, who sought out interesting situations and set Donnie right in the middle of them, giving his scientific brain new and wondrous things to ponder; thus Donatello's mind had grown, next to Mikey's vivid imagination, the tales he told and the worlds he weaved together out of sewer tunnels, and the ways Donatello would follow after, thinking of ways to give these imaginings flesh, to give these worlds life.

The day that began his conscious life was a day in which Donatello had very little role; it was a day he observed his family, and discovered a network of equations; it was a day when he and Mikey had sat on the sidelines, while Leonardo and Raphael, two electrons ever in motion, were transforming side-by-side and anticipating the drama of their later lives. But above all, it was a day about a pigeon.

Master Splinter had a great respect for these curious creatures, calling them the "rats of the above," and they were, to a lesser extent than rats and bugs, normal companions in the upper sewer tunnels, after they would wander into storm drains in search of a food morsel or something shiny. It was not uncommon for the boys to point the birds back up to the streets or scatter them as they ran through the tunnels at play, sending showers of feathers through the dark air. Until the age of nine, Raphael had had the most pets of the four of

them, most of them pigeons, for the reason that he had the unfortunate but endearing hobby of always picking up the injured vermin they found and taking them home to nurse them back to health. This was something Donatello remembered complaining about nonstop to Master Splinter, citing the hundreds of diseases Raphael could pick up from the birds, which their adopted father would wave off—if the young turtles could survive in a sewer, a sick pigeon couldn't make things much worse. More amazing than not picking up any diseases was his brother's success—or luck—in never losing any of his pets. Each one recovered nicely and Raphael would happily let it go and wait for the next one.

Perhaps Splinter was waiting for the lesson to teach itself, or for the right opportunity to come around; perhaps, as he did with Mikey, he simply didn't want to spoil the innocence of one of his younger sons, and remove his delusions, and so put off the discovery as long as possible. When they were nine, however, Raphael's luck ran out. He kept a pigeon for a month, long enough to name it Freddy (after Freddy Krueger, much to Mikey's chagrin), and to get rather attached to it. It had broken its leg and wing, but unlike its predecessors did not seem very inclined towards healing; at the end of a month Raphael carried it everywhere, trying to entice it to eat, to walk, and to live. But Freddy was withering on his little bones, losing his gray feathers and exposing diseased flesh below. Donnie recalled how Leo would watch, going from concern for the bird, who had a comfortable and accustomed place in their family, to worry for his brother. At nine, Leo's eyes were older than his brothers', careworn and slightly world-weary; he sat with Raph, trying to help him tend the bird, while Mikey led Donnie off on adventures.

On that day, Donnie overheard a discussion between Master Splinter and Leonardo while waiting for Mikey to find his skateboard; he wished he had never heard it, though it would be several years before he would feel guilt for not telling Raphael he'd known.

"Leonardo… I fear your brother's suffering grows day by day as he watches his pet perish, and the bird's suffering will not abate. The

merciful thing to do would be to put it out of its misery, but a I fear Raphael would not understand if I tried to do this. I must ask, Leonardo—you and your brother are often of one mind—perhaps it would be easier coming from you?"

There had been silence from within the room for a long while, and finally Leonardo's resigned voice. He had long ago given up fighting the responsibility Splinter bestowed upon him, even at such expenses he would not understand until later in life.

"Y-yes, Sensei."

Later, seemingly unrelated, as Donnie and Mikey ran through the sewer tunnels picking up scraps of things so easily turned to experiments and toys, they stopped suddenly to the sound of their brothers' voices, both raised in anger, and Donnie grabbed Mikey back with the signal for quiet, listening.

"Leo—give Freddy *back* , or I'm—I'll"—

"Raphael, we have to let him go—it'll be a lot easier, okay? Stop being such a baby about it and buck up!"

"Freddy's my friend, Leo! You're not the boss of me!"

"First of all, Raphael, it's a stupid bird, and you shouldn't have gotten so attached to it in the first place. Second of all, I'm the oldest and I *am* the boss of you, so *come on* . We'll let him go just below the park."

"Leo—he can't take care of himself! He can't walk—he can't fly—*give him back* !"

Mikey was pulling on Donnie as he looked around the corner, watching their brothers fight over the shivering, sickly bird. His youngest brother's face was stricken.

"I don't like this, Donnie—let's go tell Master Splinter they're fighting."

"I think he knows, Mikey," Donnie whispered back.

"Why isn't he *stopping* them?" Mikey protested, tears in his eyes.

Donnie looked away. "It's just the way it's gotta be, little bro."

"Raphi— *stop it* , just stop it!" Leo yelled, as Raph struggled with him to grab the bird back; he finally shoved him, making his younger brother take a few staggered steps backwards. "I'm trying to make this easier—don't make me do what I'm supposed to do, okay?"

Raph had turned hysterical. "Why are you doing this? Freddy's hurt —he never did nothing to you! Give him back!" He made a run, but Leo blocked him with his shell; they struggled for a moment, until Raphael was on his back, held down by his brother's foot.

"You're such a *baby* ! Can't you see how much pain he's in, Raphi? Can't you see I'm trying to help you?!" Leonardo calmed himself, and took a more gentle hold on the fragile bird. His voice quieted, listening to Raphael's quick, panicking breath. "This is the only merciful thing to do, little brother. You gotta learn… I'm really sorry." And, with a quick, deft movement, Leonardo broke the pigeon's neck.

Donatello whirled his head away from the sight, looking the other way down the tunnel, feeling Mikey's eyes on him, trying to hide his horror. Not knowing what to do, Donatello grabbed his youngest brother and hugged him, thankful that he hadn't seen. Donnie squeezed his own eyes shut—knowing, as Raphael could never know, that what Leonardo had just carried out was the hardest thing he'd ever done so far in his young life.

Raphael, on the ground and looking up at his brother's height, watched the limp body of the pigeon for a moment, in utter shock. With the little breaking sound, something behind his eyes had splintered, threatening to shatter. "Freddy?"

Leo leaned over and knelt beside his brother. "Come on—we'll have a funeral for him, up in the park. Just you and me. Okay?" He handed the broken bird to Raphael, who shook his head. "It'll make it easier—I promise you." Leo received another shake, and couldn't hide the sadness from his face. "I understand if you wanna bury him on your own…"

Raphael, still looking at the little bird with slightly less shock, held it with both hands and began walking back to the lair, leaving Leonardo to follow, confused.

They heard no more about it for a couple days; they spotted Raph with a small shoebox on the first day and saw him slip off by himself, and assumed he'd taken the first steps; after that he was very quiet, showing up for meals before disappearing again, sometimes spotted in the corner of the training room, crouched into himself.

On the third day, Splinter led Donnie and Mikey into the training room for some balance work and meditation—it was then that Donnie noticed the smell, quite unlike and far stronger than anything in the sewer mélange they were accustomed to. Splinter stopped them as they opened the rice paper door; Leo and Raph were already there, the latter huddled up with his face into the corner, and the former pleading with him.

"Raphael, this's gone on long enough—hand over the box, and I won't tell Master Splinter."

"Go away, Leo. Just leave me alone," Raph muttered, talking into his arms, as he was holding something close against his shell with all his might.

"Leonardo," Master Splinter called, but Leo didn't seem to hear him. Donnie and Mikey exchanged glances, remaining behind their adopted father.

Leo reached down and tried, gently at first, to pry the object out of Raph's arms, so they were both hugging it simultaneously—he

pulled, and Raph, sitting cross-legged, allowed himself to be pulled up and around with it, holding on with a death grip, his eyes shut tight.

"C'mon, Raphi, don't do this. Just give me the box—we'll have a little funeral, okay? You can't sit here in the corner like this, it's *crazy* ! You're gonna make yourself sick!"

"I can't.… I can't…" Raph whispered, holding on ever tighter, and Master Splinter walked forward.

"Listen to your brother, my son. He speaks from love."

Surprised, both boys lost the box as they jointly pulled on it, and the contents came flying out, as they could not fly in life—Freddy, half decomposed, his skull partially bared and one wide-staring eye bulging, while maggots worked away in the rib cage, making the remains of the diseased outer skin move and ripple. Michelangelo started screaming. Donatello and Master Splinter scrambled to calm him; in the chaos, Leo and Raph fought each other until Raphael managed to crawl forward and get the corpse back into its shoebox and hold onto it, hunched into his middle as though his life depended on it.

Leonardo snapped, and kicked his little brother in the side, yelling at the top of his lungs into Raphael's surprised, wide-open-eyed and silent young face. "Holding a dead animal for half a week is something a *lunatic* would do! You're not crazy, Raphi! I refuse to think you're crazy! *Stop acting crazy* !" He punched him, and received no change in expression, so he reached down and began shaking him roughly, fruitlessly, waiting for his brother to return. "You're not even seeing me! Why aren't you reacting—why won't you punch me back?" He paused the shaking, and ended up with his hands resting on Raph's shoulders desperately, looking half-crazed himself, as well as confused. "Stop, Raphi—just stop acting crazy…"

They had gotten Michelangelo to calm down, and Donnie had an arm around him, looking at his siblings and attempting to sew the

matters in front of his eyes into something comprehensible.

"Leo, he's not crazy, he's just sick," he said, impotently; he'd meant to say Raphael might have picked up some disease from the rotting pigeon—it came out sounding very different, however. It was an idea, from that day on, that Donatello never quite let go of.

Splinter, rubbing Mikey's back and speaking between the young turtle's sniffles, gazed at his eldest son. "Leonardo—your brother is mourning. He needs you to be strong for him." He then looked at Raphael, compassionately. "Let it go, Raphael. Let your brother help you."

Raph was still looking at Leo's wild face, with that same look of shock. "I can't," he said, as though surprised at his own statement. "I can't."

"Mmm… it is as Donatello said—your pets have made you sick, Raphael. You must allow yourself to grieve, and remember that death is part of life," Splinter said, and sighed. "I asked Leonardo to put down the bird because I thought it would be easier coming from him. I think now that he was not ready to take such a burden."

Leo's eyes widened; then, by rote, he bowed his head. "I understand, Master. I… I failed you—and you, little brother…"

Raph's face had changed, gazing at Leo. "Why… why didn't you *tell* me Master Splinter told you to?"

Leo looked confused, then angry. "I… I wanted to… to just let him *go* … and we'd keep it a secret, just you and me, like always—so I wouldn't *have* to. I didn't want to do that to you. But you wouldn't listen. Why won't you *listen* to me? You're such a stupid baby sometimes, Raphi…"

"I see," said Master Splinter, in a foreboding voice. He handed Mikey over to Donatello and waved them out of the training room, sliding the door shut. Donnie and Mikey sat out in the den on the floor for a

long while, Mikey hunched over and crying while Donnie rubbed the back of his shell. He found himself thinking, the equations falling into place. His brother Leonardo, who worried incessantly; his brother Michelangelo, who absorbed people's pain and escaped into his own world; his brother Raphael, day-by-day, perhaps crazy—perhaps sick. He looked at Mikey, and made a promise to himself—if Leonardo was to take care of Raphael, then he himself would always look after Mikey. That was the first time Donatello felt like someone's older brother, felt himself, somehow, extending to new definitions. His conscious life began. A sick person can be healed, if the right medicine can be found. Mikey looked at him.

"Why is Leo so mad at Raphi?"

"I don't know, Mikey. Because he's sad, probably." He patted Mikey again. "Wanna go ride skateboards?"

Mikey shook his head and looked around. "Let's find a shovel—and a better box."

Donnie was taken aback, but they helped Raph bury Freddy the pigeon as a family, at Central Park in the middle of the night. Raphael was very sick after that—he ran a fever for days, and threw up nearly everything he ate, half ill from the dead animal's presence, and half grieving its absence, and his failure to help it—and Leonardo nursed him, hiding his own sickness, his own failure.

The equation continued, as Leo slept nights with Raphi up in his bunk, holding onto him—tending him like a sick pigeon. He had been a god for a shining moment, just as Raphael had always believed him to be; but in that powerful second, he had not been the god he thought he would. He had wanted to be a merciful and compassionate god, who ruled with selflessness as his governing principle—if he had been these things, how had he then made his brother—his twin—so sick and miserable? How had he managed to separate them, when they had once flowed into each other, Leonardo's flesh into Raphael's, one mind and one heart—how had he infected his brother's soul, and seen in himself his own madness,

and his own grief? He had held Raphael in his hands, and broke his neck. It was the merciful thing to do. And so Leo's first fevered nightmares went, mumbling in his sleep as he hugged his brother. His little brother. His to tend, and care for, to be strong for. His to fail, and control, and kill, and hurt. His own.

All of them noticed, but said nothing, the next time they came upon a pigeon with a broken wing, sitting painfully on the sewer floor; they walked on, while Raph trailed behind, looking at it, unable to let it go —before Leo doubled back and led his brother away. Raphael never had another pet after that; though for the next year Donatello spied him secretly feeding grounded pigeons and freeing trapped rats, until Leonardo would berate him. He at last created blinders for himself— by the time they were preteens, Raphael wouldn't even notice the suffering vermin, as though not seeing was the only way he could deal with it. He pretended not to remember Freddy the pigeon; perhaps he really didn't remember. The origin vanished, but its effects, the equation, remained, foretelling Raphael's actions forward in life. It was the streets that this energy turned upon, the detritus that couldn't be saved—and like a true lunatic, Raphael repeated the same actions time and time again, waiting for a new outcome, plugging the same numbers into the same formula, looking for the loophole in physics, for the mistake in the universe, for his delusions to be right. Donatello should have known he was Nightwatcher, and that in some way, he would always be Nightwatcher.

It was all in the equation.

Mothers and Daughters

Author's Note: Alright, finally. I hate taking so long to update; if it will console anyone, I have been working on this story for the last week... I was just writing ahead. I beg forgiveness! Special thanks to Tristripe for all her reviews and for that ego-boosting rec on Stealthy Stories, and to kytyngurl, who's always helping me out.

Chapter Dedication: For my birth mother--thanks for always taping Ninja turtles for me when I was little.

The gig Mikey had that day was one he told no one about.

It was normal for him to regale his brothers with hilarious stories about kids who needed their older jock cousins to come in and finally break open a well-made piñata, or complaints about uptown mothers who were so fidgety from drinking lattes and running up their husbands' gold cards that they acted like he was the garbage man, not around for their kids' birthday parties. There were other stories, after he'd been doing it long enough, that he just kept to himself. Because they ran together, too much alike—the norm.

Today was another one, but it cut Mikey especially close. He always dreaded the upper middle class kids; if they had a parent around, it was usually a mom who hid cooking sherry in linen closets and who was half-sloshed by the end of the party; most of the time, both parents were busy with their lives, still on cell phones while the kids ate cake. Today, it was Becky, celebrating her birthday at her best friend's house, because they were so close together. This was the way Mikey and Raph would celebrate their birthdays, back when they were little—a day with Master Splinter to themselves, no training—just their father playing with them and showing them special places under the city. Donnie and Leo would get the same, though their days were slightly different. Splinter would read with them, or build up a fire, and help Donnie with a transistor radio, or go

through art books with Leonardo. A day with their father, relaxed, no worries.

Today, Becky didn't want to blow out the candles on her cake until her mom arrived. Her friend's mother spent a long time on the cell phone in another room, while the other adults, parents of kids more middle-middle class, stood handing out favors. Mikey and the other clown stood at the back, waiting for the chance to be entertaining again, and thus useful. The other clown was traditional, a bit old, but kind-faced; obviously poor, but good at what he did, and Mikey liked him—he sang and did magic tricks earlier, while Mikey had made balloon animals. Little Becky sat at the head of the table, staring at the unlit candles, morosely. Sure enough (Mikey could have set his watch by it), the other mom came in and told Becky that her mother had an important business meeting, and wouldn't be coming.

"But… but she promised she'd be here," Becky protested, with the voice of someone who was used to being disappointed. A voice Mikey recognized. Lots of kids, layered on top of hers, like hands, bound in friendship, though they'd never meet.

"I know, honey… but she said you'd love her present."

Michelangelo felt the beginnings of cynicism fanning at him, and wanted to scream. None of these kids, or Becky, wanted presents in place of their parents. If any one of them could have traded in the games, the clowns, the cake, for a day with their moms and dads in the middle of a hectic life, they'd take it. A day of presents and clowns didn't make up for the other 364-odd days of a latch-key existence, nannies, and ignorance. He wanted to tell Becky that his own father was gone. That his brother had been gone, and the other one nearly gone with him. That he would have traded anything, his video games, the cash he made being Cowabunga Carl… And it wasn't until that moment that Mikey realized that he *had* been angry at his brother Raphael—not because he resented him for the money he didn't bring into the household, for when Leo was gone Raph ate little at home and used no electricity and barely any water—but because he just wanted him there. Donnie had been angry that Raph

wasn't helping. Mikey had just wanted to see him, to know he was there, to spar with him or eat dinner with him. The details one takes for granted, until you realize you're sharing a bathroom with a ghost you see at the corners of your life.

But Mikey was the clown. Such enlightening things were not his job. So he made Becky a balloon animal, trying to make her smile. He was moderately successful. The smile was a small spark, that would dim into the cruel air with no fuel upon which it could grow. She would grow up cold and mean-spirited, writing nasty notes about girls at school. She would become a nasty uptown lady and a nastier wife or career woman, or both. Her children would be the same.

A clown knew these things. A clown could not change them. Mikey and the old hand exchanged looks, through masks of make-up and cotton.

All in a day's work.

Feet splashed through spring-level rains and sewage as Lizzie led the four brothers further downtown, towards the WTC site; she was silent again, communicating only with salutes and grim thumbs-ups or thumbs-downs, as though she had used up all her energy telling Raph what she needed to do and showing Donnie what had already been done. Meanwhile, walking at the rear of the group with his long-range bo as protective measure and his headset still on, Donatello's mind whirled. A little girl with a photographic memory, while rare, is of course no intense discovery—still, he had never met anyone with a memory like it and, while before it had been an amusement, he now saw what a tremendous advantage and burden it carried with it. He now began to wonder if the real target of the Foot assassination had been their young charge, and not her mother. Leonardo walked a few feet in front of him, glancing back occasionally with looks that plainly asked what was on his mind; but his and Leo's relationship had altered too much for him to pull Leo back a bit and express his concerns. Donnie instead held onto his thoughts until he discerned it

was necessary for their leader to know them—and at the moment, he didn't.

Mikey anxiously tailed the girl at the front of the group, telling jokes and in general being his obnoxious self; both Lizzie and Raph for the most part ignored him, though he managed to illicit the occasional smile from the former and the occasional smack on the head from the latter. Raphael walked with his hands folded, watching her, his eyes opaque. He felt a vague storminess at himself for coaxing her into drawing everything that she'd remembered, though Leo would tell him it was for the best—she seemed so drained and so tired once she'd finished, as though the memories—or the tenacity to which she clung to them, refusing to speak—had been a kind of energy. He supposed it had been defiance. He could understand defiance.

Downtown sent a variable thrum and whir down into the sewers for several layers—the district so busy that the turtles could always define it by the trembling and vibrating of the tunnels below. They hit it at rush hour, when the legitimate business types began rushing home and the illegitimate business types began slinking to work, and the city shifted between light and shadows, puzzle pieces rumbling on new plates, creating and sealing fissures. A time when women walking to their cars got mugged and raped, and street venders tried their hardest to swindle their way into on a good start for the evening. This was the time Raphael's mind came alive, when he grabbed a donut for breakfast and punched in, joining the detritus.

Lizzie stopped abruptly, in a leaky spot her companions knew to be directly under a Bank of America building, and ducked into a low, dark tunnel, gesturing to Raph to follow. He and his brothers moved after, glancing at each other, though Leo and Donnie hung back to look in from the outside.

It reminded them all of them of the burrow Splinter had once kept them in, when they were very small and able to stand extremely close quarters. It was a small space, mostly formed of blankets, pillows, and heaps of clothing—well-hidden and cloaked by the noise

from above. It was also empty of any other human presence and had obviously been so for a number of weeks—no longer was food stockpiled in the clearly delineated corner, no longer was fresh water kept in the bucket. A film of slime and dust rested on most everything, and moisture coated the floor like a heavy mist. It had been lit from a small but sophisticated mirror trick, using the red sunset glow from above and bathing the alcove dimly in a fiery glow, reminiscent of embers. Mikey gazed around and scratched the back of his neck.

"Well, it's uh… uh…"

"Can it, Mikey," Raph said, in a low voice. Lizzie had her back to them, gazing around; he could not see her face, and was resigned to not knowing her thoughts. Instead he waited, his heart low but comforted by reality. Telling her wouldn't change anything. She had to see for herself, and feel the emptiness.

"You okay, dudette? If you wanna wait for a while, we'll be cool with it," Mikey said, sounding as though he were at a loss. He didn't know how to deal with death any better than she did, and wouldn't try vague consolations. Raph glanced at him, then continued to watch and wait.

At last she turned, and met his eyes. Raphael was far more comforted to see defiance in them—no questioning looks, just plain, angry, honest defiance.

"You're a smart kid, Liz. Ya knew already before we came here—I don't blame y'fer havin' to see for yourself, though," he said, in a low voice.

Her breathing was shallow—the look on her face, rather than steel as it had always been, had turned strained and white—it told him she had known, but hadn't let it leak into her consciousness until she'd seen the abandoned final hideaway her mother had used to keep them safe, and which had failed. Her hands were clenched into useless fists—she brushed by Raph and Mikey, out into the sewers

and passed Leo and Donnie, who watched her in trepidation as she strode some feet away. Michelangelo on his heels, Raphael followed her out, and gazed on as, in a sudden and frighteningly arbitrary motion, she punched the slick metal walls—again, again, and again, until Raph hurriedly came after her. He picked up the whirl of wild clothes and red hair, his arms tensing lightly to make her stop struggling, and tried to find her eyes.

"Hey— *hey,* kiddo—listen t' me, alright? Take it from me, not cryin' when ya feel like you'll blow up if ya don't is called bein' an idiot."

She looked dead up into his eyes at that, a fire of defiance dancing hellishly through them, not helped by the sunset light finding the grim sewer, and her strands of auburn hair. " *You* never cry, Raphi. Not even when that lady stuck spikes in your back."

Raphael could feel his brothers' eyes on him—could feel Mikey's wide look, that gaze of a younger sibling he knew so well, open and fearful of seeing his weakness, yet craving it as the key that would allow him to be weak as well; Donnie's, one-part scientist's discernment, the other part fraternal compassion, knowing already; Leo's, guilt, fear, burden, and understanding all at once, overwhelmed, implicit in Raphael's personal agency, responsible and resented. He could feel his own face burning, and had be not been green, he and the light and Lizzie's hair and the fire in her eyes would have been hued by a similar pallet. He couldn't avoid her eyes, and heard his voice drop an octave, heavy with sadness.

"That's because… because…" He swallowed, watching those young defiant eyes, and half-smiled. "That's cuz I'm an *idiot* ."

She glared, then started, slowly at first, to shake her head—after a minute, her hair tossed fervently, and the defiance began to break, letting pools of moisture gather into her eyes. She became no longer a fighting ball of savage movement, but small again—finally she broke eye contact and placed an arm around Raphael's neck, to let out one deep and horrible sob, before crying silently. Raph kept his face stony, staring at the pipe wall, until finally closing it out. He

heard, rather than saw, Mikey come up close, now that the explosion had passed, and patting the girl's back—his presence made her tears come faster, as though floodgates growing wider. They let her cry herself into silence; at some point, Leo and Donnie had come closer, facing outwards down the two different directions of piping. As a group they began to move.

They didn't get far.

Raph pulled Lizzie close to him, as Leo drew in a breath, standing in front of his brother and the girl. A cloak of darkness choked the pipe before and behind them, but their night vision would not be deceived. Figures. Red mesh eyes, offensive stances, on either side. Waiting for them. And the messenger they had met before, so familiar now.

"It is a pleasure to cross paths with you again, Leonardo-san," the messenger said, coming forward with his cronies. "Instruct your *otouto-san* to hand over what we need, and none of you shall be harmed."

Mikey looked at Raph; wordlessly, Raphael handed Lizzie to his younger brother, and went to stand beside Leo; Lizzie watched the ninjas as well as she could in the new darkness, eyes wide and receptive. Taking pictures unnervingly. Don moved in, bo crossing the space of the tunnel in defense of Michelangelo.

Leonardo did not waiver. "The little girl was found and taken care of by my brothers and her position is their call. If they won't hand her over, you'll simply have to fight us."

The messenger made a small, surprised sound; Raphael grinned through the double parallel scars on his face.

"Your weakness as a leader is obvious," the messenger said in his accented voice. "You should not allow your underlings to control you as they do, Leonardo-san. Pardon my advice."

Leo stared the ninja down coldly. "I will lead and watch out for my family the way I please. Thank you for your advice."

Mikey and Donnie exchanged glances, soundlessly mouthing *WHOA* to each other. Raphael stood at Leo's shoulder, watching his brother's face out of the corner of his eye. He felt a chill at the coldness in his elder's face, the icy curtness in his voice, but was mildly, vaguely, impressed by it. He himself could never be cold, curt, frostily polite while projecting sure death on the other end of his vision; he radiated fire in everything he did, on the edge of no control, finding strings of fear and pulling them mercilessly in the easiest, most honest way possible. But he could admire it in Leonardo all the same, rather than feeling envy—and discovered, in the wave of it, that it had always been admiration, sorely disguised. Raph kept his mouth shut, willing his heart to keep an even pace, trying to slow the passion and anger. He could wait—could wait while they dispensed with the pleasantries—could wait until Leo wanted him in the banal conversation.

The ninja turned red mesh eyes upon Raphael. "Karai-sama has her fears about you, Raphael-kun. You would be wise to hand over the child while your family is still in one piece—you still have your younger brother to think about, ne?"

Mikey half-turned. "Hand over Lizzie? Screw off, pork rind—no way!"

Raphael chuckled. "You can see Michelangelo and I're endowed with the same sparklin' manners and the same opinion on the subject. Kid ain't goin' nowhere 'til ya go through mine 'n Mikey's dead bodies!"

Mikey beamed, gazing at Raph from behind. "I love it when ya use those great Indiana Jones lines, bro."

Raphael had left Leo and Donnie an out, and glanced at Leo; Mikey looked to Donatello, who sighed.

"Neither me or Donnie're gonna let some Foot ninja make off with a ten-year-old, little brother," Leo said, wryly, smiling. Lizzie gazed around at them, still in Mikey's arms, frowning slightly. She then glanced at the Foot ninja.

"But—he was with her. The lady, with the big sword. You're not iron. Not like mom, and she still couldn't…" she stopped abruptly. Mikey patted her back.

"Hey, no sweat, dudette. We may not be all cool and iron like yer mom, but we sure got hard shells."

"And hard heads," Raph chuckled, knocking on Mikey's noggin as though in search of a good coconut.

"Look who's talking, knuckle-head," Donnie tossed back at his fellow middle brother, facing off the Foot rear guard.

Kids , Leonardo heard a voice say in his head—realizing he sounded like Master Splinter. He ran through strategic options as through a deck of cards—they could take the Foot easily in close quarters, but the chances of Lizzie getting hurt were far greater. A manhole lay a little behind the heads of the front guard—the way the bastards got in, most likely, from the street lamp glow making it through a small opening where it had not been replaced properly. Going topside would mean losing home field advantage, but that only worked if they wouldn't be afraid to show the Foot the way to their home. And that wasn't happening. He could sense Raphael's gaze on the manhole, and sent him a silent message with his eyes. *Up?*

Raph gave him a rakish look, which could only mean one thing. *Up* .

Unfortunate for the front guard to be in their way, of course. Leo and Raph bum-rushed them together, running up the curving sides of the tunnel on either side, and sandwiching the group.

"Take the girl! Karai- *sama* wants her alive and unharmed!" the messenger yelled, before Raphael cracked his jaw with a sickening,

wet sound, right into the slimy piping.

The rear guard took their cue and advanced on Donatello, who still stood, unflinching and ready, his bo cutting across the space still and even. As he dodged a *bisento* , he heard Mikey spring Lizzie onto his shell.

"Hold on, dudette. You're goin' for a little ride on the Mikey bronco!"

Lizzie grunted, trying to hold on stoically to the round, smooth shell in her ubiquitous ball of clothes. "Raphi—being Han Solo on the pajama men."

Mikey laughed, whirling his *nunchaku* . "Let's hope he doesn't get the carbonite again, huh? His face is bad enough!"

Donnie laughed, clocking one of the *bisento* wielders, and took a step back. The smell of the sewers was overpowering, but he could detect a familiar, foreign scent.

"Hey, Leo—you might want to take extra care not to get cut by one of those weapons," Donatello called, knowing the information was probably superfluous.

"Figured as much, Don!" Leo called back, ducking under a katana blade trying to sweep his head right off his neck. His shell hit against Raph—they'd been herded into the center of the circle of front guard, fighting back-to-back. He heard something heavy drop into his brother's hands.

"Leo—do me a favor, and drop on the count of three, kay?" Raph said, out of the side of his mouth.

"Huh—why?" Leo asked, parrying a *tonto* and a katana at once with his *ninjaken* .

"You'll see."

"Raph—don't be cryptic, now's not the time to be a showboat"—

"Leo, just do it, will ya?"

Mikey chuckled, as one of the rear guard came too close and got clocked by his *nunchaku* . "Got the time on that one?"

Donnie looked at a fake watch. "Forty-five seconds. Not a record, but pretty close."

"If they get to kiddie insults after another ten, then do we get a record?"

From the front guard, who were now circling so tightly around Leo and Raph, their brothers could still clearly discern:

"Stop being so dramatic—what is this, *Boondock Saints* ?"

"Do me a favor, Leo—leave the movie references to Mike."

"What's in your hand, Raphael?"

"On the count of three"—

Donnie and Mikey smacked a ninja over the head from two angles at the same instance, just as a loud whirring and several yells of pain sounded from behind them, making them whirl.

Leo had ducked in time; he was still ducked as Raph stood above him, the pair surrounded by a circle of fallen, moaning Foot ninja—in Raph's hands still swung his long *manriki* chains. Mikey's jaw dropped with excitement.

"Those're the *Nightwatcher* 's, man!"

Behind him, Donnie got his bo under the knee of the last rear guard soldier, and knocked his head against the wall. He turned again, trepidation playing across his features at the sight of the *manriki* , and Leo's expression as he stood.

"What made you start carrying *those* around with you again?" Leo asked, obviously attempting to keep the disdain from his voice. "You're not nearly as good with them as with your sai."

Raph grinned wryly. "Ever since I found out what a disadvantage short-range weapons are when you're chained to your brother. 'Sides—practice makes perfect, right?" He glanced around at the recovering Foot. "Not so bad, huh?"

Lizzie, still on Mikey's back, pointed past her ride's head. "Raphi—missed one."

The messenger, who had pretended to be knocked out, scrambled to his feet suddenly, and barreled into Michelangelo, taking the turtle unawares—the three of them bowled past Donnie and down the tunnel.

"Damn it," Raph muttered, in pursuit, with Leo hot on his hells and Donnie ahead of them. Mikey and the messenger struggled on the ground of the passage in front of them, Michelangelo on the bottom and fighting with all his might to keep a dagger from piercing his skin. Lizzie had rolled away, and now came back, her shinaii in hand, and beaned the Foot soldier over the head with it. Donnie came even and kicked the poisoned dagger flying, while the messenger tumbled sideways, dazed. Lizzie poked him with the shinaii when he stopped moving.

"Liz, get away from him!" Donnie shouted, hearing Leo and Raph catch up.

In a flashing movement, the Foot had flipped back up into an upright position and grabbed her, though he had to put up with a wildly flailing ball of rags hitting him silently, her face as ever like steel.

He did not make it very far. An ungodly roar pierced and echoed over the sewer walls, and Donnie and Mikey's eyes widened as twin chains lanced past them—the *manriki* swung and fastened around the messenger's neck, snapping him back with all the force of a

hanging—he flew backwards five feet, twitching on the ground, and Lizzie fought free. Raphael yanked the weapons loose from the corpse, feeling his brothers' eyes, unflinching. Mikey and Donnie glanced at each other again, expecting their brothers' to degrade into a shouting match. Instead, Leo rested a hand on Raph's shoulder, as Lizzie came towards them.

"You okay, Liz?" Raph asked, swallowing. She gave him a stone-faced thumbs-up, making him smile, and he picked her up again, stowing the *manriki* back in his shell where they hid.

"There'll be more coming," Leo said, glancing around after giving Raph's shoulder a final squeeze. He could feel Donatello and Michelangelo's amazement—but what could he say? He thought of his brothers at ten; he would have snapped a man's neck to protect them any day. "We better get topside. Stick to the alleys and then the rooftops—we should be able to lose them after a few blocks."

Interlude: Mutually Exclusive

Author's Note: You will notice by now that the interludes are telling one story, while the regular chaps are telling another. At some point, the stories will intersect. Let me warn you, though, that the next two interludes after this one will be dealing with upsetting themes. One can enjoy this story without the interludes; I wrote it in such a way as that would be possible. I made you all wait a long time for the last update, so here's the next one, at lightning speed . Please enjoy, and feedback is always appreciated. Big thanks for the great response to the last chap: Airy, Tri, and Nettikgirl, thank you especially for always writing those HUGE reviews the help me know what I'm doing right, and thanks to everyone who always sticks with me.

Before Donnie had been old enough to ever find and repair a television, to say nothing of pirating cable for it, the boys had all been voracious readers. The nature of their lives necessitated the lesson that all things are in some way incomplete, as most books and comics they found were missing pages, and these holes in understanding required filling-in from their own minds. Donatello and Michelangelo, one part brain and the other part imagination, would have long games filling these holes; thus books and comics became dialogues that could immerse them for hours in dark sewer tunnels. Raphael, on the inverse side, had always pragmatically accepted these holes as missing pages in bound volumes of paper and ink—what conclusions he drew about them he kept to himself. Leonardo, however, was never content with these holes, and each time would set out for the definitive answer; he was dogmatic in this vein, believing that some absolute truth existed in these pages, and it was up to him to discover it.

At these ages—seven and eight—what they read was one of the few things that set Raphael and Leonardo apart. They walked the same, had many of the same gestures and gesticulations, similar patterns of speech, mimicked sayings—both had solemn eyes, though Leo's appeared older, if one knew how to look—their eye shapes were the

same, the way they frowned in concentration or frustration—their quietude was the same, though Leo was quiet because he was always thinking about some lesson of his master's, while Raph was simply quiet. Or appeared simply quiet—simply quiet and thus sometimes seemingly *simple* unto itself. *What* they read being different did not necessarily catch Splinter's eye, because as a rat he had read little literature himself and as a parent was happy to see his sons applying their reading skills at all and not getting up to mischief.

Leonardo took to Japanese and Chinese characters early; he would read anything in kanji that he could get his young hands on. His favorite story at eight was *The Tale of Monkey* (or *Journey to the West* as he discovered it in other versions)—a pilgrimage adventure involving a monk and various trickster animals and friends along the way—a tale of lessons in the journey itself, Buddhist teachings, parables and morals, and exciting characters drawn from the ancient traditions of China. He read it backwards and forwards in English and Chinese, even finding a version cut down with hiragana into Japanese, which helped his understanding greatly. He never found one full version until his teens, but through these many permutations, gleaned the entire story as he had few others. He found snippets of haiku and traveler's tales, monks' diaries, *The Art of War* , books about swords and honor and Pure Land Buddhism. He read Arthurian legend by Malory, "The Knight's Tale" in *The Canterbury Tales* , and *Don Quixote* . In these faraway languages and lofty prose, the above world was fair and honorable, and deserved protecting. He had not yet taken his own pilgrimage to learn the ultimate lesson, and pay the ultimate price: his innocence. He was yet to wonder if the truth he had been missing until his own travels had been in those missing pages—and if so, why his father hadn't been able to help him understand. It was not something he realized he lost, anymore than a book knows it is missing pages; only readers see, and wonder.

Raphael, conversely, who was more interested in the various dialects of the world that he could hear just above him, disdained classical Japanese and read any and all American fiction he could;

the more dialogue the better. If he could read it aloud and hear the various tongues of people above him, from all corners of the country, the spice of their speaking and all those strange, yet startling, little differences, he seemed content. His favorite book was *To Kill a Mockingbird* , something small and familial enough that he could easily wrap his mind around it enough to really care; plots didn't matter to him, only characters, their words, and the way they spoke. His version—the only one he liked and bothered to keep—was missing the ending. What he believed truly became of the lynching and racial injustice he never spoke aloud; perhaps because he was afraid to know, and set it in stone. He loved Mark Twain, and *The Crucible* , and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* , and *The Catcher in the Rye* , which were all giant works of dialogue. For this very reason, he despised the high, confusing prose of Shakespeare, Chaucer, Milton or Malory, all of which seemed so removed from him and endeavoring to entangle that he would eventually close the book in disgust. As he grew older, he continued to read American fiction, but with a darker streak: *The Talented Mr. Ripley* , *On a Pale Horse* , *Double Indemnity* . He did not believe in complete stories—and nothing he read endeavored to be so. He never read foolish tales about shining good guys and dark princes, high Buddhist thought and Catholic dogma, as his twin in all else loved to do; he read about crime and ambiguous protagonists, ambivalent endings, dark futures, darker afterlives. But at nine-years-old, when he found and lost his final pet, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was still the book he leafed through and carried around the most; it was about a pair of siblings, a boyish sister and an older brother, discovering right and wrong—or the ambiguity of right and wrong—in the real world. Simple as he may have seemed, he understood that much.

Raphael and Leonardo spent days having intertwined fever dreams after the presence of the dead pigeon; they had sepsis, though Donatello, having limited medical books and more interest in differential mathematics at the time, couldn't be sure. Though Leo tried his hardest to hide it as he tended to his brother, he eventually succumbed, and Master Splinter took Donnie and Mikey out of the bunkroom, unsure as to how infectious the pathogen was. He gave

them what expired antibiotics and fever reducers that he could find; fearing spreading the pathogen, he left the bunkroom alone as much as possible, as Leonardo seemed to be holding up better under the condition, having had less contact with the pigeon. Donnie knew that it was not the pigeon that made him ill; holding onto his brother had most likely passed the bacteria between them, through their porous skin. He did not tell Splinter, however—knowing that to separated them now would do no good.

One night, Leonardo awoke after a long dream of tumbling through confused images and blackness to a moment of lucidity. He could feel his brother's shivering body next to him, but realized his own chills were gone. His heartbeat stopped rocking the front of his shell; his eyes no longer blurred. Master Splinter was standing in the bunkroom, looking at them in Raph's bunk, piercingly.

"I fear his suffering is too great, Leonardo. You must do the merciful and selfless thing. You are strong—take his agony from him; do not let him drain the poison from you and leave you an empty vessel…"

Leo's eyes grew wide; as Master Splinter spoke, he found himself not lying down, but standing in the training room, ready for sparring. He had been matched up with Raph, as on most days; sword and sai, perfectly paired—while the clatter of wood came at him from his right, where Donnie and Mikey were already at it. Master Splinter watched the bo and *nunchaku* , trusting Leo to have a peaceful and judicious match with Raphael, who didn't look like he wanted to be there. Yet while Master Splinter watched his brothers across the room, his voice still reached Leonardo.

"Your brothers are relying on you. I shall not always be here, Leonardo, and you must learn to carry on in my place."

The match began; Leo did not like what he saw in Raph's eyes.

Sword and sai locked together, but Leo's strength was greater—he began pushing Rapahel backwards, who only half-pushed back, his heart not in the match—and Leo's temper flared. He locked his arm

suddenly, and twisted one sword, to send both of their weapons flying; while the other side remained locked, he used his free arm to punch Raph in the face, who dropped his other sai in dumb surprise.

"Fight back, you stupid baby," Leo heard himself saying in a nasty undertone, so that Splinter could not listen. Though Leo sensed that Raphael could not hear Splinter's words, his eyes told him that he did. Leo did not like what he saw reflected back at him. Raph watched him steadily from the floor, trying not to shake; Leonardo stood with sword at the ready, before reaching down to haul his brother roughly back to his feet. "You think I *like* any of this? You think I don't wish I could just nurse pigeons or read comic books or take clocks apart? Do you think it's fun?"

Surprisingly, Raphael shook his head, with that same blank, slightly dumbfounded, closed expression on his face, blocking Leo from seeing into him. He remained stoically quiet, even when Leo punched him again and shoved the fallen sai into his hand. Raph left it, with a puzzled expression, at his side—Leo had never seen him like this before in training… so lost, as though he couldn't remember why he was there. A voice from the present whispered in his ear.

"…sepsis…. Bacterial blood poisoning…. Causing fever, rapid heartbeat…"

When or where was he? Suddenly Raphael's puzzlement extended to himself—frustrated, he punched his little brother again. A part of him was trying to separate, to look at the situation objectively, but he stopped it, instinctively—he knew he would not like what he would see.

He felt someone shivering next to him, warmth near his neck; he realized for a moment that his eyes were shut, and it was moistly dark, and very, very cold.

"I'll take it… I'll be leader if you want me to, Leo…"

He forced his eyes open, feeling a sense of nausea pierce him between his temples; back in the training room, sparring with his brother.

"What did you say?" Leo asked, his fist falling by his side; Raphael, spitting out blood, shook his head.

"Nothin', Leo," he said, thickly. Leo almost scowled at the word as it went through his head. Thick. His little brother was acting thick, but he knew—just leafing through his books and watching his eyes when he read—that Raph was smarter than this.

"What, Raph—now you're gonna act like Mikey and wait so you can cry to Master Splinter and get me in trouble? Is that why you won't fight? Raise your stupid sai!" Leo's voice echoed around the training room—sounding horrible as it rebounded back to him.

"Leo—the match is over. You won when you disarmed me—Master Splinter already took Mikey and Donnie to get ice for their arms," Raphi said, still puzzled. He was right; the training room had become suddenly empty, dark in the corners. Leo's temper flared once more, a dark heat radiating in his stomach; he felt cold on his skin, and a deep heat below, making him wish fervently to kick out at something, kick the feeling away, an overwhelming sense of being hot and trapped and confined.

"That's not a win—you barely even fought! When are you gonna get over this pigeon and get back to normal?"

Raphael blinked at him. "Is that where we are? I couldn't tell… I guess I remember this. Sparring with you." He put his sai in his belt. "What is normal for me, Leo? How am I supposed to be acting right now?"

His brother's words were well-chosen, yet his face was blank of expression, his eyes absent of thought, as though some ventriloquist were speaking through him.

Leo sheathed his swords, exasperated. "We used to have fun when we sparred—you used to love it, disarming me and whatever. You've never just… stood there. Waiting for me to hit you."

"I guess it just doesn't seem all that important right now," Raph said, blankly. Splinter's voice came from one of those darker corners.

"…You must do the merciful thing, my son. Do not let him drain away your poison…"

"…sepsis… poison… pigeon…"

"So you don't care, huh?" Leo asked, his fists balling up; he wound back and let loose, watching Raphael fly several feet backwards to land with a heavy thump. "Maybe you *should* !"

He walked forward, towards his little brother, who was sprawled on a tatami mat.

"Now—get up and fight me again!" Leo demanded, but Raphael's breathing was shallow, and he appeared to be shivering.

"I… I don't feel so good…"

Leo knelt down; but when he got there, he cocked his head; Raph was wearing blue instead of red, though Leo, better than anyone else, could still see whom it was. The effect remained disturbing, however.

"Cut the crap, Raphi! What the heck is *wrong* with you?"

Raphael reached up and tugged Leo's bandana, almost playfully, though he seemed somewhat… delirious. "You're just the same as me, Leo. Just the same. Always."

Leo blinked and his brother wore red again; a trick of the eye, a small hallucination—or perhaps wishful thinking. He looked in his brother's amber eyes and saw himself reflected back, confused and scared, a nine-year-old who still had nightmares and secretly

thanked Buddha each time Raph crawled down to his bunk for the same reason. Who clung to his little brother pathetically, like a teddy bear, under the guise of protecting him.

"We must… do not let him… drain away the poison…" Master Splinter's voice boomed again.

Someone near his neck, when he realized he'd shut his eyes again, in a strange dark.

"It's okay, Leo…" That small, choked voice near to him, that he wanted to fall into. Someone he wanted to believe.

He was looking down at his brother on the tatami mats—Raph, bruised, a line of blood trickling out the side of his mouth, and smiling like a simple idiot. A flame darted through Leo's insides.

"… *he is yours to protect, Leonardo. Always* ."

"I hate you…" Leo heard someone say, and wasn't sure who the words were intended for. That flame reached through each of his veins, sending ash through his lungs, clenching around the glass orb of his heart, making gravelly, splintering sounds in smoldering threat. He saw that simple smile for what it truly was—a knowing one, a compassionate one, his mirror in his best moments. He reached down to touch it but found only air, a sai, and a tattered book.

Leonardo never disdained Raphael's choice in books; in fact, he wondered at them. But the base speech of all the main characters, and the base nature of the plots, and the baseness of the protagonists' morality ground at him, and he eventually shut the books, confused. He could not see what Raph found heroic in these characters, what he found interesting in the text. This impenetrability stunned him, froze him, disturbed him—angered and hurt him. As though his twin were trying to be different from him. He tried to get Raphael interested in King Arthur or Don Quixote, but his brother shook a head at the complicatedness of the prose. Leo couldn't blame Raph, who was really so simple, for not being able to

understand the way the old writers transcribed their ideas—but why, his young mind wondered, did Raph have to choose something so unfathomable in return?

On the tatami mat, Leo picked up the book *To Kill a Mockingbird* , which had frustrated his young mind so many times before, and started reading. His mind tried desperately to pound past the boundaries it had erected against the text, but it was the text itself that jumped up and hit him between the eyes, without his having to do a thing—like Raphael itself it could remain silent and impenetrable, until it suddenly spoke for itself, and made things clear, in language precise and hard, yet somehow comforting.

"… *There was no hurry, for there was nowhere to go, nothing to buy and no money to buy it with, nothing to see outside the boundaries of Maycomb County. But it was a time of vague optimism for some of the people: Maycomb County had recently been told that it had nothing to fear but fear itself…* "

He realized that this hot, sweaty, do-nothing Maycomb County reminded him, as nothing in his own books had before, of the sewers, and their lives. And those words… "fear itself," punched him in the gut—what was he afraid of, what had he been chasing and running from, why had he lanced out at his little brother, in hatred and anger and disgust, when all he saw were those deceptively simplistic eyes? He hated that Raphael had concealed this from him, this world of beautifully dialectic words that he hung on the merest edge of understanding. He hated that it was so hard to see what his brother cared about, when they had always been so close. He hated that it was his own belief in Raphael's simpleton mind that had made this possible.

"… *You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view… until you climb into his skin and walk around in it…* "

Climb into his skin. There had once been no difference—thoughts and feelings had once flown as easily between them as water

between cell walls. But a sense of solidification, a trapped claustrophobia inside his own self, fanned at Leo's face, rising up from his shell and the confined knot of splintering glass where his mutated heart was supposed to be. A ripple seemed to be moving between them, cutting them off and making harder surfaces of their skins, so when he reached out to touch his brother's mind he would find, someday, a brick wall and nothing else. How would he bridge that gap, what words could there be to make his mind clear? Raphael's eyes showed for a second that he understood, but Leo could not trust in that. Could not allow himself to.

The book said it was a sin to kill a mockingbird, who sang just to make people happy and had not a mean bone in it; well, then what of pigeons? And what of his sweet little brother, who day-by-day closed himself off, made himself more wooden and opaque? Leo closed the book and clenched it between his hands, as though holding on tight would coax the words into slipping under his skin and help him understand.

Leo realized irritably that his eyes were shut again—he clawed his way up, trying to force them open. The book came with him, something solid held tightly between his fists, and that humid dark returned; he could feel his heart rocketing against his shell again, could feel his breath stuttering to come out in shallow puffs, could hear his blood thrumming through his temples and knocking on his eyeballs, cold tingling his radiating hot skin. At last he fought up through waves of sleep and wrenched his eyelids open.

Amber eyes, in the semi-darkness of the bunkroom; for a moment, Leo thought he was looking in a mirror, but he of all people knew better—knew the slightly shorter curve of his brother's face, the slightly darker shade of his eyes, though the observer might be caught unawares. The eyes were somewhat glazed with fever, but awake, open, and mostly lucid, looking right back into his—both of them lying on their sides up in the nightmare of Raph's bunk, a hell of twisted sheets and fever dreams for days upon days, interrupted by tea, toast, throwing up, and pills. Raphael's shell was up against

the wall—there were no pillows in the area around them, only the expanse of cool sheets, though not cool enough to bring that terrible fever down.

Leo could still feel himself clenching something between his hands—when he blinked and squinted through the dark, he realized it was his brother's throat.

Raphael seemed to be breathing normally, so the grip was not tight; but his eyes said that the hold had woken him up, and as he now looked into Leonardo, the flint in his eyes was impenetrable. Leo attempted to release his grasp, but Raph reached up and held the hands where they were, putting pressure on them in a silent gesture. His eyes were without tears—resigned, like Freddy had been, to oblivion, in his half-dreaming state.

Leo could not make himself be understood. He could not find the barrier between his feverish hallucinations and what he was really doing—perhaps this too was part of the dream. Yet why was he sharing these nightmares with Raph, why were they journeying to these mindscapes together?—like the darkness of the same egg sac, an endless shared chaos of sounds and miasma. To be the twin who strangled the other in the womb, as both could not survive—or, perhaps, killing him out of mercy. As Raphael watched him, Leo knew they had had the same dream—their sparring match before the sepsis had hit, flavored by a topsy-turvy of time, and strange words from Master Splinter. Leo tasted tea on his lips—their father had been there, then, and had spoken.

Poison. Sepsis was poison, and their contact passed it back and forth between porous skins. Their contact poisoned one another—deadly bodies passing between two twins that could kill them both; identical toxins. Yet Leo could not stand to leave the bunk and endure the nightmares and the dark alone—with some effort, he managed to pry his hands away from Raphael's neck. He held his brother's arm, and slid down towards the foot of the bed slowly, swimming in piles of sheets; he found a pillow, under which there lay a pocket of cool fabric, and settled both of them beneath it, in

complete dark. In the cool, perfect black, they hid, away from flitting shapes in the empty room, away from the spinning earth and sense of vertigo and heaviness, away from extreme heat and cold.

He could feel Raphael's eyes, questioning, searching for him in the safety of the new cocoon he'd created out of the air and shapes. There were still raised areas on his brother's face where he'd tried to punch "normal" back into him, unsuccessfully.

"Leo…if he told you to—wouldn't you have to do it?"

Leonardo shivered and searched for his brother's smooth shell, tracing its grooves and patterns—one of the first things he had come to know by sensation in his life. The chills returned, but the heat radiating from Raph's body helped to alleviate them. He tipped his eyes and lightly touched their foreheads together, flat on the mattress beneath the pillow, on the cool fabric, so much like a crib, or a play mat—or anything, except that bunk where endless nightmares had their horizons.

"Master Splinter says… there's no real strength in simple defiance."

He could still feel Raphael's eyes, and heard the sadness in his own voice, shocked at how easy it would have been to suddenly be facing these feverish dreams alone. Leo rethought his words.

"But I guess we're defiant just by living."

He felt Raph's smile, rather than saw it; his simple brother understood more than he let on.

" *O-nii-san* ," Raphael said, in a light dialectical, as though reading the book of Leo's mind, finding the much-perused dialogue; it was a word they'd learned from Splinter, but hadn't used in years. Leonardo's title. Raph leaned over and lightly kissed his brother's cheek, before hazing back into full fever dreams.

Leo's limbs shook now in full force, in the throes of chills, and he clung to Raphael, trying not to slip into nightmares himself. His hands found the ridges and the swirls of his brother's shell, that comforting familiarity which he knew better than his own—the same patterns, each time he traced them, over and over and over, smooth and part of forever.

The missing pages of a book might have told him how easily such things are shattered.

Specter of Me

Author's Note: Aww, you people and your wonderful reviews! You put me in a good enough mood to update next day. Thanks to kyt for her lovely spamming! Back to normal chaps here; after this will come another interlude, and it will not be a short one, either. For all you Mikey fans, enjoy! As for the Raph fans... for this first part, I just imagined Raphael fixing a motorcycle while chewing on a lollipop stick with Korn's "Twisted Transistor" playing, and it was hot. So I wrote it.

When Raph had still been allowed to work in the shop during the day, Michelangelo enjoyed coming home around noon in the van, pulling into the warehouse. Raphael would have already put up the "Out to lunch" sign, and Casey would be at the front of the shop, doing diagnostics. Golden sunlight would fill the warehouse from high, dusty windows. His brother would be at the back, heavy metal blasting while he fixed a motorcycle, chewing meditatively on a lollipop stick out the side of his mouth. Around noon, he usually had Korn playing, and wouldn't notice his younger sibling's eyes.

Mikey would watch him, watch his brother lost in the music, focused on the engine in front of him, and would wonder what he was thinking. The Nightwatcher cycle gleamed in the corner. Finally tired of not being noticed, he'd slip into some joke about axle grease or head-pounding music that would make Leo want to throw something through a window, and his brother would snap his eyes up at him, smiling.

The point, Mikey supposed, was that Raph was cool—and that somehow made him excusable where Leo and Donnie might not be. Mikey wanted his approval and had no way of attaining it. He was a clown

He probably thinks I'm a joke. And not a very funny one, either , he found himself thinking. His brother was the Nightwatcher.

His brother was the Nightwatcher.

All that time spent idolizing, Raph's little remarks, enjoying his secret.

I would've understood if he'd told me .

Korn continuing to play, Raph wiping the axle grease from his hands.

I wouldn't have told Donnie . *He knew I wouldn't* .

Some part of him realized Raph *didn't* know—Raph and Leo had always been in the next room, somewhere else. Fighting, exploring. Searching. While Donnie and Mikey sat and invented and drew and ate pork rinds.

But Mikey would push regret from his mind, push blame somewhere else. Raphael *should've* known.

Then Raph would turn off the music and give him a small smile.

"Goin' home for lunch? Gimme a sec, I come with."

And forgiveness, laying over that rough spot in his heart a varnish of excitement. Because, after all, his brother was cool.

His brother was the Nightwatcher.

Leo looked over the roof, scanning the streets for two turtle figures and a little girl. The night was not going well. He and Donnie had separated from their younger brothers, with Donnie holding a bulky pile of clothes from outside the Goodwill, leading the Foot on a wild goose chase while Raph and Mikey had escaped with Lizzie through the alleyways. Unfortunately, only Raph knew this part of Manhattan well enough for such a diversion—Leo had no idea where Raphael would choose to hide himself and thus did not know what he should

steer clear of. To make matters worse, the Foot had fallen back five minutes earlier, and now he and Donnie stood on the rooftop, alone.

"They're not answering their cell phones," Donatello murmured, obviously staving off worry from the edges of his voice. "I activated the tracker on Raph's, but he still has it disabled from his Nightwatcher stunts. Mikey's is powered down—probably still off from his gig earlier. Do they have to be so irresponsible about the simplest things?"

Leo allowed himself a smile; when Don worked himself into a nagging groove, he sounded worse than his older brother. "Relax, bro. Raph knows this part of town—if anyone can get Liz away from the Foot around here, it's him."

"Oookay, except that the Foot are fighting dirty with long-range, highly poisonous weapons and overwhelming numbers." Don said this part aloofly; when he spoke again, his voice was low, tinged with something Leo couldn't quite pinpoint. "Not to mention he's already lost control once tonight."

Leo's smile grew larger on one side, humorless. "I don't think he meant to do anything different than what he did. Rather clean break, actually. More or less… perfect." He could feel Donatello's eyes burning into him.

"What about your Bushido, big brother? Didn't you always try to teach us the way of the true warrior?" Donnie's question was cold, working furiously at his cell phone to find their brothers.

Leo continued to survey the street. "Warriors kill, Donatello. If a man with poisoned weapons takes a child away from people who are protecting her, knowing that he is taking her somewhere where she is in grave danger, then he should accept death as a possible risk. It was a clean break, Donatello—a ninja killing. In his fury, Raphael is capable of worse."

Donnie bit down on his tongue, unable to stop the words. "Didn't he sound like an animal to you? The way he screamed?"

Leo glanced at him; as he spoke to Donnie, he could feel the disdain as it slipped out in his words and through his eyes. "Taking a life isn't like the movies, Don. You can't aim and shoot, and blow smoke off the gun, like some cowboy. The first time, you may be callous, thinking it'll be easy. But after that—the second, third, tenth time—you know what's coming. And it doesn't get any easier… until you're a monster. And monsters don't scream in rage and pain when they have no choice but to take a life. Monsters don't sound like animals, Donatello. They sound like people—cold, calculated, and calm, when they point and click and kill. So be careful, when you pass judgment on your brother." *About what you cannot begin to understand.*

Donnie shook his head. "Master Splinter… he would have prepared us for this."

Leo finally turned around fully. "There is no preparing for it. This is the rest of your life you're looking at, little brother. *You will kill* . It's harder to kill with the bo staff, but one day, you'll find you have no choice. That day has already come for your younger brother, and passed, a long time ago. Neither you nor I were there for it, and there will be no way I can protect you either when it comes around. It might even be today—but like the day of your own death, accept that it *will* come."

Donatello's eyes faced him with fear, unused to seeing his elder brother in this way—forceful, frightening, nearly a Master, through the veneer of stretching youth. Less than a half-hour ago, Leo had been exchanging childish insults with Raphael; now a veil rested between them, Leo and Raph on one side, Mikey and Don on the other. It didn't feel real—Donnie couldn't look down at his blunt, protective bo and see it as an instrument of death, no matter what Leo or Master Splinter tried to teach him to the contrary. They could make him memorize ideas, but they could not change his vision of the world. Donatello's mind was a well-oiled machine, and hard to break or influence. Even in the worst of battles, he had always

knocked out his enemies, rather than inflicting mortal harm. He supposed this might be different, if he wielded a blade. Yes, the blades were part of it. Appropriate that Leo and Raph had come to that day sooner than he and Mikey. Blades and steel thirst for blood, similar dirt-taste in the mouth. Different from simple wood. Different. He, Donatello, was not an instrument of death. He, Donatello, would not have to kill if he didn't want to.

"Those Foot are a few blocks over—I just saw a bunch of birds disturbed," Leo said over Donnie's thoughts. "Circling around, to get the drop on us. Or else they've spotted Raph and Mikey. Either way, we better preempt them."

Raph pulled Mikey back, avoiding the light from a trashcan fire, where a couple of the street brats were warming their hands, and stayed in the darkness of the alley.

"Better not. Homeless teenagers can be nuts, bro," he warned.

Mikey leaned against the wall beside his brother, and let Lizzie down onto the ground—she went close to Raph, gazing out at the street in obvious curiosity, drinking in everything she saw, while Raphael patted her head, silently reminding her not to move too far out.

"You know this street?" Mikey asked, sounding too blasé. He was nervous, and off-kilter. Trying to reconcile two things in his mind, and looking for new paths with which to do so.

Raph answered while keeping an eye on the street kids, and another eye on the rooftops, waiting for movement. "Yeah. Used to these streets. When I—well, when I needed info, ya can usually count on this bunch t' have the down-low. They thought I was the shit, anyways. Didn't hassle 'em."

Mikey's eyes were wider than he intended them to be. "Thought you said they could be dangerous?"

Raph half-grinned. "Well, so c'n I. They're protective—got their turf an' their crowd an's long as ya don't step on their toes, they're pretty cool. Ain't got a home; what was I gonna do, give 'em more trouble fer tryin' to stay alive?"

Mikey frowned. It hit him as almost funny that he'd spent the time Leo was away with upper-middle class unhappy kids, while Raph had spent some with the lowest class possible. Street pigeons. His brother could go pitch black, and still be who he was at nine, somewhere deep down.

"There's no place for any of 'em?" Mikey pressed. He supposed he knew, but Raph's answers somehow never failed to surprise him.

Raphael snorted, slow to disappoint. "Street's better'n foster care for some teenagers. No one wants 'em by now. Spoiled goods." His voice came out bitter and harsh, and Lizzie's eyes snapped up from her observation as he said it. "Suppose you might not know it after watchin' all those rich uptown kids, Mikey."

Mikey sensed cynicism creep into his small answering smile. "You'd be amazed. They might be fed—but doesn't really seem like they're all that better off, ya know?"

Raph looked at him, then back at the street. "Guess it's possible t' live in a house and still be homeless."

Michelangelo opened his mouth to answer, but froze, as a very coherent voice breathed out, strong and quiet, from Lizzie's mouth.

"Or not have a house but not be homeless, because you have people who can be your home. Right?" She glanced up, first at Raph, then at Mikey. She was not observing, hard and stoic, as usual, but sending ideas and messages with her eyes—rather than steel-gazed, she had a tentative look, receptive but oddly, wonderfully, like that of a ten-year-old. Mikey's jaw dropped, but Raph did not let his amazement show.

"Yeah. Somethin' like that, I guess," he said, smiling. A moving shadow caught in his peripheral vision; both his and Mikey's heads snapped in the same direction, towards a roof across the street. "Too thin to be Leo or Donnie," Raph observed. "This is a through-alley. C'mon!"

Donnie and Leo threw each other easily from roof-to-roof, silent, easy partners, able to work together without thinking about the process, rendering the previous conversation as non-detrimental as possible. As they landed on a particularly high roof, Leo skidded in only to slide backwards on his shell, away from a line of quick-thrown shuriken. Donatello helped his brother to his feet, and they stood back-to-back, weapons drawn.

"Poisoned shuriken. This is beyond bad," Donnie muttered, waiting for movement. Leo almost answered him, but a strong, Japanese-accented female voice interrupted.

"Leonardo-san. It is an honor to meet you again. And you, Donatello-san."

"Karai," Leo muttered under his breath; in a swath of black cloak, removing her red mask, the leader of the Foot clan landed before him; from surrounding roofs, the shadows of her guard stood at the ready, melding and separating from penumbra. Her face was composed, impassionate.

"I will not go further in pleasantness, Leonardo-san. Your *otouto-chan* has killed one of my elite—I will not feel badly for returning the favor."

Leo winced at her titling of Raphael, Karai's underhanded ways of insulting his leadership and his brothers. "Your retainer accepted the terms of his mission, I assume? Or did you think my brother wouldn't kill to protect a child?"

Karai was unaffected. "We have no interest in hurting or killing this child. Death is not necessary, Leonardo-san—but it is a direction I

am willing to pursue. Observe." She nodded to the ledge to Leo's right.

Simultaneously, cautiously, he and Donnie moved to glance over.

Raph had the distinct impression that the Foot were herding them to somewhere very specific; he ducked a volley of purple-tipped shuriken, pushing Mikey's head down further with him, compulsively. Raphael dropped the *manriki* weights into his hands, feeling the chains snake down coldly on the outside of his forearms. He stopped them, allowing the Foot a few more steps, as they came in from both directions of the through-alley. He glanced at Mikey, who half-grinned, and ducked, just as Raph whipped the chains out in two half-circular motions, opposing directions, Yin and Yang from his back and front. The front line of both groups fell, as the weights crushed cheekbones, broke noses, gave concussions, removed teeth, fractured jaws.

Mikey let Lizzie down, and she pulled out her shinaii, standing between their two shells. On one side, Mikey whirled his *nunchaku* —on the other, Raphael swung the *manriki* , keeping one group at bay while his brother dealt with the other, picking off members of both sides, with parallel whirlwinds of doom.

Leo and Donnie watched their brothers back closer together in the alley right below them—as though contrived, placed there in order the entice a reaction out of the elder siblings. They kept their faces impassive, even as Mikey ducked down again, when Raphael was forced to send the *manriki* out in continuous circles, just to keep the wave of foes at bay in the small, hard-to-escape space. The only way out would be a smaller alley between the buildings across the street from Donatello and Leonardo, which ended at a very high wall.

Karai's voice continued. "They are all armed with poisoned weapons and shuriken, Leonardo-san. They are ordered to keep the shuriken at bay, because I sense we can avoid killing your brothers. They would sacrifice themselves—but *you* could convince them to give up the girl to you. Then you and Donatello-san shall bring her to me,

and I shall spare them." She looked at Donnie. "You are both *o-nii-san* , ne? Protect your brothers. It is all that you can do."

Donatello closed his eyes. His rational mind screamed in a loud cacophony, blinding him with thoughts and conflicting ideas. Oh, to give up that mind and memory to the Foot and a woman like this, who would kill her when her use was up—and he knew his idiot little brothers, foolhardy and emotional, who would jump in front of a few hundred poisoned shuriken for some little girl, not out of honor, but from their hearts. His own heart beat out something constant, but also contradictory.

Mikey, showing him a drawing of himself as an old crazy scientist, laughing at his expression.

Raph, coming in with a microwave for him to take apart, not waiting around for a thanks or for acknowledgement, just wandering off stoically to do the dishes.

Mikey, jumping up and down with plans for a jet-powered engine for his skateboard that made little sense at all, a wide smile as he waited eagerly for Donnie to get home.

Raph, taking the budget and coupon book deftly out of his hands with a small smile, doing it without ever nagging him or nudging him or making it seem he'd done him a huge favor—which he had.

Mikey, reading comic books upside down on the couch.

Raph, polishing his bike while heavy metal beat in the background, smiling a secret smile. Like always.

Mikey, turning around in dizzying circles, with Lizzie on his back.

Raph, taking a fake beating from a spiked stick and trying not to laugh.

Lizzie, offering Donnie a marshmallow and a stony-faced thumbs-up.

Lizzie, measuring out exact cups and tablespoons, helping him make breakfast.

Lizzie, making his brothers grin and laugh and run, and go on huge tangents about Star Wars and horror flicks and killer pizza, and act like…

Lizzie making his little brothers act like his little brothers, again, once again. At last.

Donnie closed his eyes, shutting out the sight, but not the sounds.

Raphael screamed, beating back the encroaching, odd-smelling blades, using the sheer length of the *manriki* to keep them as far off as possible. The *bisento* chopped at the chains constantly as they swung by, waiting for the moment, that off-chance, of just the right impact. They had time to kill. The turtles and their young charge couldn't go far.

One adventurous ninja jabbed a spear in towards Lizzie, as though wondering what the reaction would be—Mikey wrapped his *nunchaku* deftly around it, and yanked it away—he considered throwing it right back in the ninja's face, but remembered the blades were all poisoned. Some misty part of his brain, far back, wondered if Raph would have thrown it anyways. He shook the thought off.

Just as he did, Raphael grabbed the spear from him, and Mikey gave him a wide-eyed look—instead of throwing it at the offending Foot, however, Raph threw it into the brick wall above the small alley to their right. It quivered as it dug into chinks between the bricks, but held firm.

"Grab Lizzie, jump up, and swing over their heads into that alley, Mikey. I'll follow ya—I just can't protect us from both directions much longer!"

"Damn it, Raphael," Leo muttered, watching as Mikey swung Lizzie onto his back and jumped, arcing up into the adjacent alley. Into the

clinch. But he could see they had little choice—amazed as they both probably were that the Foot weren't using their shuriken, the other weapons still stood as a substantial threat. Raphael could take a beating with his back up against a wall for a long time—he hated being surrounded, though. In the thinner alley, only a small amount of ninja could attack them at once. Yet along the rooftops above that little alley, more Foot crawled and crept, to stand above his brothers, ready to take them out at a blink from their leader.

"The dishonor of this astounds me, Karai," Leo ground out, dropping the honorific insultingly from her name, and hoping it would not be lost on her.

It wasn't.

"You are different from your brother, Leonardo-san," she said, in a low, slightly offended voice. "Do not act as though you are the same, using his faulty manners because you dislike this situation. I could easily kill them and take what I want. I have respect for you, however, and there is no reason why our groups could not be useful to each other in future. I am giving you the chance to keep this peaceable."

Leo glowered frostily, considering. Master Splinter's voice intruded upon him.

"… *yours to protect* …"

" *Someday they will look to you, Leonardo* ."

An someone else's: " *O-nii-san* …"

Flashes. Mikey's grins, blue eyes sparkling bright, charming as he held aloft a handmade comic book. That fire glinting in Raphael's, looking up into the real word, rare rays of light hitting skin that seldom felt the sun.

Glances. The appraising, open look of Mikey's, when he got mischievous and started thinking up the best, meanest jokes for a person. Raphael's opaque gazes that suddenly transmitted sparks, flickers of understanding, dark and electrifying.

Laughs. Mikey's, a troublemaking giggle heard around corners after cellophane appeared on the toilet seat or super glue in the toothpaste tube. Raph's, a little-heard, low chuckle, honest, stoic, sweet, and often surprised.

Smiles. The ready, stapled-on grin of Mikey's that seemed to never leave, almost manic in its constancy. The wondering smile when something real made him suddenly happy, though no one often knew what it was. The instinctual twitch on one side into a defiant, wry smirk for Raph, daring death; sometimes shy, almost indistinguishable, as he watched something his brothers did and never told anyone what he liked about it.

His little brothers, quiet and vigilant, loud and smiling.

"We can't," Donnie said at his back. Leo looked at him steadily.

"We must."

"But—they'll *hate* us!"

"They'll be alive to hate us."

Raphael whirled, *manriki* ready, but the Foot ninja did not seem to be following into the slim alleyway. He backed toward Mikey and Lizzie, warily.

At length, the reason for the Foot's lack of attendance came walking into the small space.

"Oh, man—am I glad to see you two," Raph said, relieved, wiping sweat from his brow.

"Leo! Don!" Mikey called out. "Came to get those Foot ninja off our butts just in the nick of time, dudes!"

Raphael paused—he'd been moving forward to give Leo a one-armed hug for the good timing, but saw a strange look in his brother's eyes. "Hey, wh… what's wrong? One a' you injured or somethin'?"

Leo took at deep breath. "We'll have to split back up into teams to get back home. You two look beat—let… let Lizzie come with us now. It'll be easier on you two."

Mikey laughed easy. "You don't sound so good yourself, bro. 'Sup, Donnie? Ya look like someone punched ya in the gut'r somethin'!"

Raphael watched his brothers with a deceptively blank expression, eyes dark and fathomless. Donnie shrunk further back into the shadows to avoid them, but Leo matched the gaze, sadly.

"What's goin' on, big brother?" Raphael asked, directly to Leonardo. "No bullshittin'."

Lizzie, who had been standing behind him and again drinking in her surroundings, went still, but said nothing as yet.

"I'm sorry, Raph… there's no choice for us right now. Either she goes and you two live, or she goes and you two die. You're more use to her alive."

Mikey blinked, taken aback. "Wha— *huh* ? You—Donnie?"

Donnie studied the graffiti-laden wall for moment, obviously fighting something back. At length, he drew his bo. "You can't leave this alley with Liz, Mikey. Just… just do what Leo says."

Mikey's look of shock slowly hardened; very quickly, he drew his *nunchaku* , and the whirl hit the alley. "C'mon, Raph—we got some sense to kick back into a coupla bros tonight!"

But Raphael and Leonardo remained looking into each others' eyes silently, steadily.

Lizzie taped Raph's arm. "Raphi…"

But Raph already knew; his eyes slowly left Leo's, and tracked upwards to the opening to dark sky between the two building—glints of poisoned steel, dark shadows against the night, dozens and dozens of eyes behind red mesh.

"Mikey… put your 'chuks away," Raph murmured, firmly. Mikey whirled them harder.

"No way! What the heck is wrong with all a' you? *She's just a kid* !"

"So are you, Mikey," Donnie said, gently.

Raph reached out to slow the *nunchaku* —as he did so, however, a glint of silver lanced past his hand. One of Mikey's weapons suddenly lost their momentum, hanging in the air, as they all inspected it, wide-eyed. A poisoned shuriken lay buried in the wood, from above, gleaming almost innocently in the dim light, ambient from the New York sky. Michelangelo's expression froze as he gazed at it. Five sets of eyes traveled up the roofs.

"I'm so sorry, Mikey," Donnie whispered.

"Raphael- *kun* ," Karai called, now appealing to the final older brother among them, getting closer to hot water. "Think of your younger brother and give us the girl."

Mikey took hold of Lizzie's arm, bringing her closer to him in case he had to shield her with his shell; Lizzie, however, resisted.

"Listen, you whack-bag—I can't just hand a ten-year-old over t' your scummy organization, ya got me?" Raphael countered.

Leo came forward. "Raph, Mikey—stand aside. Now."

Raph heaved a huge breath, controlling himself with every fiber of self he had, and starting to show it. "Leo, how c'n you *trust* her not to kill Liz the moment she's got what she wants?"

Leo sighed. "I can't. I can't, Raph. But I have to get you and Mikey through this night alive. This is… this is all I can do."

"No…" Mikey's voice choked. "You hafta have some better plan. Something! C'mon, Fearless Leader!"

Raphael had his eyes on Mikey, blinking, with that falsely blank expression.

"Come, Raphael- *kun* . Do you wish to know what your brother's body will look like when the poison hits him? It is an ugly, messy death," Karai called, tormenting. Leo had the sudden urge to throw his *ninjaken* straight through her neck, and surprised himself with the thought.

"Karai! Don't speak to my brother. I'll handle this."

Donnie still felt sick, betraying his closest brother—Mikey, who had kept him company while Leo and Raph had been off, chasing each others' shadows. Curiously, he could feel Lizzie's eyes on him when she said:

"I'll go."

Amazing, how quickly those words silenced the four brothers. Raph choked somewhat, feeling a small sense of panic. Mikey held her arm.

"Hey, kiddo—don't worry 'bout it. We gotcha covered. We're not gonna let anything happen to you." Mikey's voice was small, and sad.

"Don't lie to her, Mike," Raph warned. "We're at the end a' the line. Liz—what if they"—

Lizzie smiled, and tapped her temple. "Can lead a horse to brain, can't make it eat."

Raphael surprised himself—he began to laugh quietly; when he saw his older brothers looking at him strange glances drawn between sadness and pity, he realized he sounded hysterical. Seldom did he feel that he'd failed so utterly—because he really had done his best, had never lost his temper; there was no if, no chance that he could have done things better. And it still hadn't been enough. Mikey's expression was closed; he still had a grip on Lizzie's arm.

A Foot ninja landed deftly beside them, holding onto a chain lowered down by the others. The soldier gestured. Lizzie yanked her arm from Mikey's grasp and hugged him, her little arms going around his big shell, making him blink at her, as in confusion.

"No… you're not goin' anywhere. Stop it!"

Leo's breathing almost stopped; the Foot above them readied shuriken in every hand, at the slightest hint that Michelangelo would really refuse and become a problem. He strode closer, trying to gently pry Mikey away from her, noticing the odd fire growing in his youngest brother's eyes.

"Leo, *what are you doing* ?" he demanded, but Leo continued, unfazed, picking Lizzie up.

"My job, Mikey. The only one I've got."

Raphael's hand stopped him. "Wait…"

Leo paused, then realized why; swallowing a lump, he nodded, and transferred Lizzie over to him, watching as the little girl hugged his brother.

"You sure you wanna do this?" Raph asked her.

She was clear-eyed, and handed him her shinaii. "Not afraid of nothin', Raphi." And then saluted, steel-eyed, making the clench around his heart lighten somewhat. She took Leo's hand, and he led her to the Foot ninja. Mikey tried to move forward and stop it, white fury in his blue eyes—but Donnie was there, materializing at his side, holding him back, and Raph was looking away, a hand over his eyes.

Leo looked at Lizzie one last time. "Thanks—for making it easier."

A stoic thumbs-up. "Not easy." Then she blinked, as though reaching within herself. "I… I'll be okay."

Then Lizzie was gone, and the Foot were gone. Only Karai remained.

"Thank you, Leonardo- *san* . The Foot owe you a debt of gratitude."

"I don't want your thanks, Karai. I want you to understand what will happen if you hurt that little girl."

Karai sounded as though she were smiling; Donnie had to keep holding Mikey back, now more fiercely.

"She is too valuable to be harmed. Put your fears to rest, Leonardo- *san* . We shall meet again."

She disappeared, and Donnie finally let his little brother go.

"What the hell was that all about, Leo? We coulda saved her!"

Leo whirled, unused to Mikey challenging him.

"Michelangelo—that was no easier for me than it was for you. She decided to go. You both would be dead if she hadn't."

Raphael took a shaking breath, visibly trying to keep it together. "We can still save her, Mikey. They want what's in her head—they won't kill her until they have it."

Mikey whirled on him—eyes blue murder in the darkness. "And what about you, Nightwatcher? What, you can run around playing hero to a bunch of jerks you don't even know, then Lizzie trusts you and you hand her over? Never thought you were a coward, Raph—but I guess it makes sense. Need a mask to do the right thing nowadays?"

Leo expected an emotional outburst from Raphael, and braced for the impact of fire fighting fire—but the opposite occurred. Raph's face and eyes seemed to shut down.

"Mikey, stop—this isn't like you…" Donnie said quietly. His brother turned, as to unleash some anger at him as well, but couldn't seem to form words. He looked back at Raph, whose face hadn't altered.

"What, no answer? It's your fault we got herded into this dumb alley—your fault they cornered us out there! I thought you knew this area! The almighty Nightwatcher can't even protect a kid, how pathetic"—

" *Michelangelo* ," Leo's voice sounded out; his tone had become remarkably like Master Splinter's. "If you're gonna say things you'll regret, you might as well keep your mouth shut."

Mikey whirled on him. "Screw off, Leo—you're not our father!"

Raphael's face clicked back into life—faster than lightening, he slammed Mikey against the wall, pinning him by the arms. Mikey looked like he was going to shoot something else at him, but paused when he saw his brother's eyes. They had been made dark by a smothered, angry fire that flared into life, pupils squeezed to pinpricks as though under massive pressure. His voice was grim.

"You listen, motor-mouth. You give a damn about that kid, you'll shut your fucking trap and help me get her back. And show Leo some respect, 'cuz he just saved your stupid ass. Ya got me?"

Mikey swallowed, sobered by his brother's quiet anger that dampened his own, and nodded.

"It's getting late. We better get back home, and figure ourselves out," Donnie reminded, gently. He took Mikey's arm and led his brother ahead; they could hear his voice consoling the youngest as he went. Leo hung back with Raph, staring at him. The anger had faded from his brother with the same ferocity and suddenness that it had awakened. He looked tired, and somehow small.

"I'm sure he didn't mean any of it," Leo said, somewhat impotently.

Raphael let out a breath of air, almost a laugh. "Preachin' to the choir, bro. I know better'n anyone people say dumb shit when they're mad. Doesn't mean they haven't thought some of it before, though."

Leo nodded; his voice became a whisper. "You're not pissed off at me?"

"I'm tired of being pissed off at you, Leo. I'm tired of arguin' over every damn thing. I'm tired of letting it toss me around and control me. I can't even remember why I do it anymore." His voice broke. "And I miss that stupid kid."

Leo gave him a wry smile. "Which one—Lizzie or Mikey?"

Raph smiled but didn't answer, so Leo came closer and put his arms around him. He felt his brother flinch and freeze up, but held the gesture until Raph relaxed into it. Leo traced his brother's shell, stopped at the cracks, gouges, the deep, horrible new grooves, fillings of plaster that still held it from caving in. Each one made him pause, his mind and muscles remembering the shell when it was whole, an old pattern, one of the first. Raph returned the hug after awhile, hesitantly. Leo expected it to be awkward, but he was wrong; his little brother held onto his shoulder blades, just before the ridge of his shell, younger for a moment.

"We'll get her back," Leo heard himself say. "Not just you and Mikey. All of us. We'll find a way." He pulled back, not sure at the expression on his own face. Raph watched him.

"You okay?"

It was jarring; Leonardo had the sudden urge to rip the scar off from over his brother's eyes, and return him to who he'd been, years earlier. Another part of him, entrenched in sadness, somehow liked the person the scar made of him, the Raphael he knew now.

A sigh. "Yeah. Let's go home."

Interlude: What Has No Name

Please read:

Author's Note: Okay. The next two interludes are about to get DARK. I am not talking about blood and gore; these next two interludes will deal with inappropriate behavior between brothers and issues of consent, and are not for the faint of heart. This first one is sweet enough, but its follower will probably piss some people off. SO. I have written *Walking the Line* so that one may ignore these two interlude chapters and get the story just fine. If you are uncomfortable with these themes, please go on to the next chapter and happily continue with the story, no harm, no foul. If you continue, please know that I have no tolerance for flames, and I will block you. I am not here to squick anybody; this is not slash, and I am trying to deal with these issues as maturely and realistically as I can. I wrote this as tactfully, non-graphically, and as tastefully as possible, verging on the edge of sheer vagueness. And as always, I encourage reviews with respectful criticism and feedback. Everything is a work-in-progress. For all those who don't wish to continue, thanks for reading, I will meet you at the next chapter. For the rest, enjoy.

The year he was eleven, Raphael took on a strange and disturbingly new energy within the family model; he became opaque, and hardly spoke to anyone, training and running through a larger sweep of the sewers alongside Leonardo, because the two of them had discovered something very vital together: danger. They raced and wrestled and looked for alligators, playing wild games of Follow the Leader until Splinter had to call them in at the top of his voice; he was able to go farther into the sewers than either of his other brothers because he had Leo with him, and side-by-side they moved closer to the upper layers, to listen in favorite, secret spots, to human conversations. In the den, meanwhile, Mikey and Donnie had discovered 900 channels of pirated cable television, thanks to Donatello's genius (of which Splinter was ineffably proud), and

ventured out less and less. Donnie studied electronics; Splinter watched soap operas; Mikey read comics and absorbed an endless stream of pop culture programming. So Leo and Raph went daily to scavenge, letting Splinter rest his bones. He was happy to see their youthful camaraderie blossoming again, despite the disturbance of the pigeon and its gruesome death. He trusted Leonardo, his closest and most reliable son, to lead his little brother right and keep him out of trouble, to be the best influence on Raphael's emotional and sometimes unstable mind.

A normal day came in the den, that would remain normal for Splinter, Mikey and Donnie; secretly, it would never be normal again for its remaining occupants, Leonardo and Raphael, valence electrons who changed at a moment's notice, never static, ever in flux. Donatello had managed to get a sonar device working to detect movement around their lair, and he was showing it to Master Splinter, explaining to him his modifications and how it worked.

"See—Mikey had this idea that we could add something in to get an approximation of size, so we'd have a good idea who was coming," Donnie said quickly, his face hot from excitement. "So I thought about it and had him help me draw out some designs and did the math and stuff, and Leo and Raph found me some components—and presto!"

Splinter smiled proudly. "My sons, you certainly make a good team in the realm of invention," he said, with Donnie and Mikey sitting near him. Mikey leapt up to show him his drawings for the piece, pointing out Donnie's corrections and formulae. Splinter chuckled, and looked up into the den around him.

Raphael had an uncanny ability to be about somewhere, unnoticed and watchful, doing something menial or odd; he often had a focused look on his face, as though to show he was so preoccupied by the thoughtless task that he couldn't possibly be listening to the world around him—his father knew better, of course. This time, Raphael was sitting next to the scavenging wagon he and Leo carted around, gathering all the nuts from the bottom and collecting them on

a few long bolts of the correct size, focused with insane eyes upon the chore. Splinter smiled.

"Raphael, my son—have your brothers shown you their new contrivance?"

Raph looked up at him, as though startled, and stared for a moment. He mumbled a tense "Uh-huh," while nodding, and then returned to his work.

Splinter's eyes softened, not sure what to say to his second-youngest; he did not believe his son was crazy, or simple—and that blank demeanor never fooled him. He did, however, believe his son was troubled and somewhat unstable, as he had been for years, despite everything Splinter had tried—troubled enough to sit in rooms and try to be invisible, when he so obviously wanted to be part of them. The only thing that seemed to get through to Raphael—the only medicine for his mind, the only balm for his confused emotions, was Leonardo. Raphael was smart enough to be slightly cynical, and would listen unnoticed in the den for hours to his family talk, if no one bothered him. But bother him they did, because he had never been so quiet and secretive before in his life, as though everything he and Leonardo saw outside the den were sworn to secrecy, and he couldn't trust his mouth to speak about anything else. He seemed on edge and tense to go back out into the world, to see more—he was hungry, for something he could not learn from books and TV and ninja lessons. Raphael, Splinter's strong, silent and strange son, liked a fourth kind of learning, and he could not find much of it here: experience.

"Your brother is in the dojo, training," Splinter gently coaxed. "Perhaps when you have finished organizing those tools, you would like to join him for a bit?"

Raphael gazed at the nuts and bolts in his hands, and those "organized" around him—he'd been at it for an hour, listening intently to Donatello explain the sonar device and wishing he could see the guts of it, to really understand what he'd been talking about. His

current task would prove useful to Donnie in the long-run, but he felt ashamed of doing it all the same—it was something anyone could (but wouldn't) do, like the dishes—a logical, yet somehow unnecessary task, that he, pragmatic and boring and mediocre, would do while his brothers were being amazing. While Donnie was making high-tech gear at eleven, almost twelve; while Leo was moving onto advanced katas and meditation at twelve; while Mikey was drawing his own comic books and writing stories at eleven. Raphael wished he could do something amazing, that he had some talent; he figured, though, in a dogged, realistic fashion, that while other people were being amazing there had to be someone cleaning coffee cans out to be used for nails, someone getting extra water, someone tossing spiders out of Mikey's bed when the kid wasn't looking—someone, in short, who was boring.

He wouldn't have minded being boring—if his brothers weren't so much better. It was hard to approach Master Splinter and say, "Look what I did," when what he'd done was scrub mold off the bathroom tiles. His adopted father was always shut away with Leo's extra training, or distracted with Donnie's feats of wonderment and Mikey's flights of creativity. For once, Raphael would have loved to offer something extraordinary to draw his father's eye, to not seem so hapless and stupid next to his siblings. But there was nothing that he could do that they couldn't do a thousand times better, except what they didn't want to do… fixing the toaster (Donnie could and would build a better one), getting the TV to stop showing static during *Days of Our Lives* (Mikey would entertain Master Splinter for hours with pantomime of what the actors were saying instead), and sitting quietly in the den organizing screws (Leo would make a Zen ritual out of it, doing it perfectly in less than a minute with his eyes closed, while meditating). Sardonically, Raphael figured it was best to act like an idiot, so at least he wouldn't be disappointing anybody when he had nothing interesting to say or do.

He finished with the nuts and bolts and dropped them into a glass jar for Donnie's use, not feeling the look his older brother sent his way that would have told him it was an appreciated gesture, and went

demurely into the training room. Raph grinned to see Leo doing his kata, without meaning to—they really were cool, even if Raph wouldn't tell his brother that out loud. Leo watched him out of the corner of his eye.

Raphael believed himself to be boring; Leonardo, now twelve awhile, couldn't disagree more. One of the biggest subjects around their house was his little brother's mind, and he himself, he knew smugly, was the only one who really had some idea of what went on in there. Raphael was dark, opaque, even brooding—he thought constantly about what they saw when they explored the sewers, stewed in musings about the upper world that he cobbled together from hours listening to the hum of the TV and under grates at various Manhattan corners. Raph could sit beneath ghettos for hours, still and unmoving, but his eyes were restless, sparkling, bright darkling in the dimness, thinking; he thought on these things as he performed pragmatic chores around the household, doing them quick and well with a glaze over his eyes, the gears going invisibly behind them. But Leonardo knew. He knew the sound of the rap music his brother would stop and listen to, enraptured by something he himself could not hear; knew the beat of children tapping, New Orleans style, on the sidewalk above, the way his brother's feet moved as he walked, innately with the beat, synched with the city, part of another world. In truth, his brother fascinated him.

And so it was massively gratifying to Leo when his brother hopped onto the mats after watching him do kata, smooth, slow, and perfect, to do his own. Raphael was below him by a couple levels, still on par with Mikey (embarrassing, because Mikey hardly practiced enough to keep up with Splinter's minimum expectation—and while Mikey had natural athleticism on his side, Raphael did not), and still one level below Donnie, who's quickness to learn made up for his disinterest. He could tell it hurt Raph not to be on Donnie's level, as they were so close in age, but Leo could see why. Raph paid no heed to form, and though he did the kata over and over again, he never seemed to learn them correctly. Leo, however, endlessly

considered his form and thus perfected his kata at a much faster rate. Leo stopped, watching his brother in his set.

Raphael sent him a slightly dirty look. "Go back to your training, Leo. It's hard enough without you staring."

Leo smiled. "I know you've got those kata down—you know them forwards and backwards. But Master Splinter won't advance you until you start paying attention. You do them different every time."

"Ease off, Leo—you don't even know my kata."

Leo held his ninjaken level. "I've seen you do them a million times—and I can see just looking at them what will put you off balance or make you miss a strike."

Leo had had his growth spurt before his brothers, and it was the first time in his life that he and Raphael weren't the same size. He felt like he towered, when their height difference was only about two inches. The difference simply felt so startling—he had never *looked down* into his brother's eyes, and for the first time he was truly reminded that they were not the same age—that he, Leonardo, was the older brother, and Raphael the younger—and it made him feel, when before he'd only logically known, the responsibility of being an example. So in the dojo, it made sense to correct Raph's form, gently move his elbow further up, coax his knee into bending. In the tunnels was another story. Up there, despite Splinter's commands for Leo to keep a watchful eye on his brother, they were equals. Raph led as often as the eldest did, his truly uninformed cynicism a perfect match for Leo's slightly weak idealism. When they were running and wrestling, two inches didn't matter. They were twins in the physicality of it, being two sparks in motion, too fast to look different, too breakneck and close to danger to *be* different.

When Raphael went through his kata a second time, this time in an entirely different way, Leo stopped him. It was a mark of Raph's trust when he did not shrug off the help, as Leo, using his now-longer arms to wrap around him, took hold of the sais, on top of his

brother's hands; he paralleled their positions from behind, and began forcefully leading Raph patiently through the kata as they should be done, sometimes pointing out corrections verbally to make it clear why they should be performed that way.

"Now—bend your knee, like I did—you see how this thrust moves you slightly forward? Bending your knee will put you back on your center of gravity, so someone coming from behind won't knock you on your face."

Raph took this entire critique silently, but Leo could see him literally biting his tongue, eyes hard; Raphael knew by this time that rejecting the criticism would get him in trouble with Master Splinter immediately, and being on bad terms with both of them meant no exploring the tunnels. On top of that, Raphael did not reject Leo's help as much as he had for a few years before, when anything Leo did that made him seem like "big brother" had grated on him immensely. Leonardo could see why, in retrospect; they had spent so long being the same that such a reversal stung, feeling unnatural. Now Leo had grown used to his power, and Raph shrugged under the yokes of it, less bothered until further developments should disturb him. It was always a grudging compromise, as Master Splinter, through Leonardo, made Raphael aware of a future reality in slow steps—big brother teaches, big brother leads, big brother has responsibility, big brother has power and commands respect. Someday, big brother will be here and Master Splinter won't be, so better you get used to it.

Leo let go and gestured to Raphael to go through the kata without him. He watched, keenly, as Raph moved, speculating—minus a few mistakes, his muscle memory led him through correctly this time around. There was so much power behind Raphael's thrusts that, when done the right way, his brother's kata looked downright deadly, even with the smaller blades in his hands normally used defensively. Leonardo had seen his brother when passion lit his eyes, more fiery and effulgent than anything Donatello or Michelangelo's gentle curiosities and creativities could bring—perhaps burning brighter

because he suppressed it so often, so when it met oxygen the fire flared into hungry life. Raphael could be a force unto himself. Leo was not yet wise enough to see that fascinating flames like his were destined to be either calmed or extinguished—as it stood, Raphael made him feel awake, alive, sharp. A wetting blade to his swords, honing him to a laser edge. The defiant toss of his brother's head when they had gone too far into the sewers, the daring grin, the sideways glance that communicated a million words.

Neither of them had noticed Splinter watching from the doorway until he spoke.

"Your kata are looking much better, Raphael. What do you have to say to your brother?" his voice was light, but as always carried a hint of threat beneath the surface, tight as steel. Raphael watched the tatami mats for a moment, putting his sai back up on the wall—they were not yet permitted to carry their weapons out of the dojo. He bowed to his older brother, speaking in rote diction as he'd been taught, averting his eyes.

"Thank you very much, *o-nii-san* ."

Leo exchanged a small smile with their sensei, before gazing at the knot on his brother's bandana, while he remained in the bow. "You're welcome, Raphael." He was supposed to say *otouto-san* , or at least attach some honorific to his brother's name for respect—but just saying the word "Raphael" was hard enough on his supposed underling's ears as it was, and Splinter understood that. Raph straightened, trying not to look disgruntled; their Master slid the rice paper door open wider for them.

"I believe Donatello has formed a list of required items for you—and Raphael already has the grocery list in his head. You may go, my sons. And Leonardo—watch out *closely* for your brother."

"Yes, sensei."

It was all they could do to contain themselves, bow, and walk—quickly—to Donnie, grab the list, and push-pull the red wagon out of the lair along with a giant trenchcoat and some other necessities. Once the den door had closed behind them, they exploded. Raph pushed Leo into the wagon and started pulling him as fast as he could away from home, both of them suppressing their laughter.

"I was so close to kicking you in the head!" Leo laughed. "Ever since he told you to hold the bow until I said 'you're welcome'—it's like he's waiting for you to get guillotined!"

Raphael laughed as he ran behind to start pushing the wagon instead, getting a great amount of momentum going—after being in the den all day, he felt like a coiled spring. "I thought he would deck you with his stick for sure when you slipped up and didn't say *otouto* —what was all that about *form* , Leo?"

"Shut up, Raphi!"

They finally hit a curving pipe and Raph jumped into the wagon behind his brother, while they went rolling madly down steeper and steeper tunnels. When they reached a familiar, even area, they tumbled out, wrestling and rolling before getting up to race.

"Betcha I get there first!" Leo challenged, pushing his longer legs—Raphael had too much energy now, though, and Leo knew better, watching him strip on ahead.

"Ha! In one a' Donnie's parallel dimensions, maybe!"

Leo could see their objective—the way into one of their secret favorite sewer caverns—dead ahead, and leapt forward, barreling into Raph to send them rolling and fighting towards its entrance. His brother was panting by the time Leo bested him, sitting on his plastron and doing a dual arm wrestle, until finally pinning both wrists to the ground, laughing. Raph struggled, still breathless.

"Got ya," Leo said, with an upward lilt, very understated and amused for what was coming. He held his brother with one hand and raised the other—

"No—anything but that!" Raph pleaded, still half-panting and half-laughing.

"Gonna ask for mercy?"

Raph shook his head. "C'mon—you know I never do!"

Leo shrugged and began tickling him in the sides, in the horribly sensitive area just above the bridge between the front and back of their shells, and could feel his brother's legs kicking ineffectually, as he tossed from side to side and giggled helplessly.

"No mercy?" Leo asked, knowing the answer like a script.

"Never!"

"You sure?"

"Yep"—Raph would say, just getting up the energy to kick up and roll them over again and get Leo into a partial headlock, which he expected but let his brother get him into every time.

"Okay—we're even," Leo answered the headlock, grinning, knowing full-well that Raph let him tickle-torture him every day as well. They scrambled up towards one of their numerous sewer hideaways, and all the junk they'd collected there. Some was practical—extra street clothes if they needed to grab groceries for Master Splinter and didn't want to run home, some components they'd found for Donnie in too great an amount, but feared he'd need again in case Mikey broke something—and the rest really served no purpose but that it had a story behind it of some nature. The tire found with a litter of kittens they'd saved from a dog in the dump, some rocks they collected to skip over water in the larger pipes, a brick some crazy old guy had thrown at them and which they'd found tremendously

funny, a tattered Mets baseball cap, sparkling stained glass from a deconsecrated church which was amazing in the sunlight, pictures of weird-looking humans with big noses or a snaggle-tooth who never seemed to make it on TV. They sat in the chamber against the wall, to catch their breaths.

" *Daijoubu ne* ?" Raph asked, slipping into their secret language—mixing Japanese with any other language to which they knew a few words, which was a cause for endless entertainment. It had it's origins in Leo finally managing to get Raph interested in something other than dialects, but he found he had to reinforce it daily—and mixing up words and vocabulary became a kind of game. Raphael, after hearing a word, seldom forgot it. He had a gift for rhythms.

Leo chuckled, still panting. " *Fatigué da yo* . *Et tu* ?"

Raphael laughed. " *Mort. Shinda* . *Muerte. Demo…"*

"Ut-oh," Leo said, grinning. "Dead, dead, dead, but?"

"THIS *ga shirareru yo* !" Raph pounced and wrestled him again, until he had gotten Leo back for the tickling.

When they had finally calmed, Leo grabbed one of the extra coats. "We better get up top if we're gonna find half this stuff by sunset. Donnie's sure made us a list. I'm not even sure what some of this stuff *is* ."

They began carting the wagon back up again, though it was well worth the ride, getting closer to street level. First they scavenged beneath the grates—they sometimes found enough money to feed a third-world country, let alone Mikey, under those grates and knew the best places to look. Today they found just enough for groceries if they forwent cereal, making Raphael cringe but bear it. They went grocery shopping only at one store—it was small, and owned by a man who was always reading the newspaper at the counter, and had a small electronic self check-out, which suited the boys fine; they would wander in wearing baggy coats and hats and disappear into

the alley, laden with food, and lower it down to the wagon, one on street level and the other below. On days they didn't find enough dropped money below the grates—particularly when there had been rain—they would find canned-food drives or church charities with groceries and secretively grab a bit to get by. On good days, they stockpiled. It all managed to work out in the end, though Raph and Leo were only now old enough to be doing it for Master Splinter. Raphael's mind was practical and Leo's was strategic—together, they were a good scavenging crew.

After grocery detail and drop-off back at the den, they went dumpster diving or hit up the junkyard for Donatello's purposes—and today, the list was phenomenal. On their way to some likely targets, Raph looked up and stopped the procession, gazing through a grating at an alleyway above them.

"Hey—it's one a' those microwave things! Donnie'd be over the moon if we brought him one of those to take apart!"

Leo squinted at it, and the alley it was in—they were somewhere in the north part of downtown. The alley looked at though it was loaded with trash bags and, even though it was light out, should provide one of them with ample cover.

"I'll go up and lift it down to you"—Raph began, eagerly, but Leo stopped him with an urgent hand.

"No way—if you get so much as a scratch on you in the human world, Master Splinter'll turn me into a purse."

Raphael stared at him for a second, the visualization flitting in front of his eyes, before he snorted. Leo gave him a pointed look and bounded off the sewer wall to catch the grid, grab the edge, and slide it carefully off, before disappearing up into the alley. Raph could hear scrapings and rustlings, and then Leo's face reappeared.

"Okay—maybe I'll be a purse after all. It's got something heavy on top—I'm gonna need your help up here."

Raphael grinned devilishly and jumped up to join him; they jointly, but silently, moved a heavy box holding the microwave pinned to the ground away, and lowered the contraption as far as they could by its cord into the sewer, before letting it go just above the wagon, hearing it land with a *thump* . The street hummed outside the dark alley, but Leo and Raph looked around, so see a couple things on their list in the trash heap—they were right outside a recently closed office building, and someone had thrown away a pile of old copier and computer parts, many so fried they would be un-resellable on the streets, but both of them knew that meant nothing to Donnie. Being broken didn't stop him from understanding how they worked any more than a dead body confounds an anatomy class.

Raph ventured further up the alley towards one last component he'd spotted from far off—very suddenly, Leo wrapped a hand around his mouth and pulled them both behind the dumpster. They could look over a pile of trash as a pair of humans—quite unlike the ones on TV, as always—trotted into the alley. Leo prayed they wouldn't see the open sewer entrance and the wagon below, but he had nothing to fear; the people were too busy to notice much of anything.

The girl wore a short skirt, and came in laughing. "I was afraid Big J'd see you—he sees you ag'n, an' he'll probably shoot you, takin' away from his cut."

The man laughed. "We'll just tell 'im I'm your daddy—you're underage, ain'tcha?"

They started kissing, but in a way that they never showed on TV nor in a way Leo and Raph had ever seen while scavenging—they always saw people who were on the streets, not usually so close in alleys. He still had Raph pulled down to the ground, and could feel his brother struggling, wanting to see what was going on, but Leo pushed him back down with his hand. He couldn't help himself, however, watching intently, and finally let his sibling up to see as well. They leaned over a pile of trash bags, spying and genuinely puzzled.

The man's odd, five-digit hands could not seem to decide where they wanted to go or what they wanted to do, and the people kissed in such a way that made it look like they were searching for something in each other's throats. Leo found himself holding in his laughter desperately, while Raph ducked down in helpless bouts of silent sniggering.

"Humans are weird," Raphael whispered, grinning; Leonardo, however, continued watching more seriously, in broad puzzlement, unable to figure out what they were up to. The humans had slowed down quite a bit, but the movements of their hands were still the same—over the arms, the back, the shoulders, the sides—working towards another conclusion—and dogmatic as always, Leonardo wanted the answer.

"…touch me there…" the girl muttered.

More mutters. "…'m, rather fondle these, shug…"

"You're so bad!"

Raph, now devoid of his brother's attention and perplexed at the entire situation, given the humans weren't talking much but muttering odd gibberish, leaned against the dumpster to his left—as he did so, a shower of old newspaper fell on top of them, floating around the alley.

"What was that?" the girl asked, darting backwards from her companion and looking around, panicked. "I better get back to work 'fore Big J gets on my ass."

And like that, the humans were gone. Leo made a frustrated noise as he and Raph tried to unbury themselves from the moldy newspaper.

"Darn it, Raphi—I was trying to figure out what they were doing."

Raphael grabbed the remaining component, grinning practically. "Looked stupid to me—just kissing, like on Master Splinter's soap operas."

"Kissing *never* looks like that on Master Splinter's soap operas," Leo said bossily, as they dropped back into the sewers. "It was something else."

Raph chuckled, organizing the components. "Listen to you, big brother—like *you* know any better'n *I* do." His eyes held a playful defiance in them, because there were a great many things about the world that rendered Leonardo no more experienced or knowledgeable than his younger siblings—nor was there any way for him to know.

Almost no way.

"Wanna try?" Leo challenged, taking the bait.

Raphael whirled, and the wagon stopped again; he was smiling incredulously. " *What* ? No—that's *stupid* ."

"What's the matter?" Leo kept pushing the envelope. "Ya scared, Raphi?"

Raphael rolled his eyes. "No. It's just—I thought *I* was the dumb one. We've seen that stuff before—on TV."

They'd seen it—but none of them knew what it really was or why humans did it. They'd only had television for a couple of months. But Leo knew how to rile his brother like no one else.

"Aw, Raphi's scared. Fine. We'll finish scavenging and you can just go back to the den and organize nuts and bolts for the rest of the day. You're so *boring* , Raphi."

Raph threw the wagon handle onto the sewer floor with a nasty clatter, glaring at Leo with a look that could crumble gargoyles. His

opaque eyes glittered and flashed clear at intervals, letting his brother see a little of what lay behind them. Leonardo squashed down the smug grin clawing its way up to his face, almost laughing at the predictability of his brother's hyper-emotional reactions. Raph marched forward, as though on a dare, and pecked his brother with almost enough force to construe it as a head-butt.

"There, see? Stupid," he said definitively, and turned back around, but Leo grabbed his arm, laughing.

"No, seriously—come on, Raphi. You can't call it stupid if you haven't tried it, right?"

Raphael rolled his eyes; the dare usually won out, and, as always, deep down he was eager to satisfy that hunger for experience which a life in the sewers has little in the way of accommodating.

"Fine—but I betcha anything it's stupid, just like I said," Raph answered, folding his arms for a minute. Leo paused; they made it halfway before both ducked down, cracking up. Once, short, awkward, before more laughing, unable to take it seriously. A second time, wonderingly; then, at Leo's insistence, again, for longer, breaking away, frowning. Raphael's eyes had gone opaque again, gears turning—in silence he watched Leo's face, who remained very solemn, unwilling to break the stare. At last Raph sneered.

"Stupid."

Leo grinned and shoved him playfully. With the microwave and components in tow, they went running through the sewers again, stowing the experiment away as another of their kiddie secrets. Like the best places to listen to human conversations or dodging crazy old men with bricks.

The closer they got to the den after finishing their scavenging, the more Raphael's smile faded—by the time they were outside the door, he was as inscrutable as ever, and Leo had turned back into the serious ninjitsu student, assuming their roles once more,

transforming from equals into *o-nii-san* and *otouto* , big and little brother. Past the threshold, Donnie went ballistic with happiness over the microwave, Mikey got the bug of glee easily, and Splinter commended them on their find; Raph wandered away from the family circle, ever the wallflower, to do the dishes. He heard Donatello come up behind him.

"Hey—Raphi? You knew I wanted to figure out how one of those microwaves worked—it had to've been your idea."

Raph gazed at him out of his peripheral vision; Donnie looked tentative.

"So? Don't sweat it," Raphael responded. "If you got one working it'd make things easier around here."

"Well… I'm just trying to say thanks, little bro," Donnie blurted out. The microwave confirmed that Raph was listening, knew what the rest of them talked about. Don sent his brother a look of doubt.

"Don't worry about it," Raph whispered, so no one would hear; behind him, Mikey was cavorting about the den, full to bursting with energy now that his brothers were home—Leo, sitting meditatively at the kitchen table grinding various teas for Master Splinter, didn't bat an eye at his antics, and Raph kept his eyes manically on the dishes, trying to block out what he knew to be coming.

"Hey, Raphi!"

Raphael ignored him.

"Raphi! Raphi! Hey, I'm talkin' to you! Raphi! Hey—you out of it again?"

Raphael frowned into the dishwater.

"Raphael," Master Splinter chided, gently. The way one reproaches a crazy person. "Please do not shut out your brother."

Raph let out a breath. "What, Mikey?"

"Knock, knock!"

A sigh. "Who's there?"

"A sister!"

Monotone voice. *Nun joke* . "Sister who?"

"We don't need one—we got YOU!"

A glass broke into the dishwater.

Leo stood, wide-eyed, admonishing. "Michelangelo!"

Raph turned, glaring, yet sending odd glances to his eldest brother—it was the first time Leo had intervened during Mikey's jokes. Mikey, however, looked around, not getting why everyone seemed so shocked.

"What? It was just a joke."

"You're not funny, Mikey. YOU NEVER WERE!" Raphael's voice raised in a strange, suppressed fury, and he lifted his hand out of the soapy water, bringing a ribbon of red with it he didn't seem to notice.

Splinter banged his stick on the floor. "Raphael! Your words become *poison* when you hold them in for so long."

"Raph—you're bleeding!" Donnie gasped, coming forward with a dishtowel. Raphael stared at his hand, blinking, as though surprised; he couldn't feel a thing, except the throbbing of his temples as his thudding heart beat blood quickly and loudly through his body. One minute he had been holding a thick cup, then squeezing… then, release. He could unleash his emotions; a moment of invincibility.

Splinter sighed, placing a hand on Leo's shoulder to make him sit back down again; despite it, Leo's eyes remained on Raph with a

glean very like protectiveness. Something Splinter had said long ago had taken roots in his heart. Both he and Donnie knew enough to keep silent as Splinter spoke.

"Michelangelo does not tell jokes to hurt you, Raphael. In the world, there are people who will use words to deliberately do you harm—you must use your inner strength to make yourself impenetrable, when you know the words are not true."

Now that he had started, Raph couldn't stop. "He makes those dumb jokes fifty times a week. I'm *sick* of it!"

"Are you hearing me, Raphael?" Splinter countered, an edge on his voice. "There is a lesson you must carry away from this—you will sit in the dojo until you are ready to listen, my son."

Donnie's hands trembled as he wrapped his brother's cut digits, torn between love for Mikey, his closest brother, and righteous upheaval. Raph blinked again, as he had seeing the blood, taken off guard.

"You're—you're punishing *me* ? For this?"

Mikey, who had been watching all this in puzzlement, riled up. "But—Master Splinter—don't get mad at him! I shouldn't a' said it!"

Splinter cocked his head at his youngest. "So—you agree that what you said was wrong? You agree that it could hurt your brother, and you knew this? Then why would you say it?"

Leo smiled, relieved, seeing his sensei's aim. Mikey looked at the floor, then at his bleeding brother.

"I… um… I dunno. Ev'ryone else thinks it's funny… most a' the time."

Leo and Donnie looked at the floor, guiltily. Splinter shook his furry head. "And does Raphael ever think it funny?"

Mikey could no longer hold his father's gaze. "No," he whispered. "I'm sorry you don't think I'm funny, Raphi."

Raph looked as though he were going to say something more, but snapped his mouth shut; after blinking a few times at Mikey's down-turned face, he shook his head and began marching towards the door.

"Raphael," Splinter's voice stopped him. "If you walk out that door, you will not be permitted back inside until you are ready to apologize for *your* words."

Raph remained silent, not trusting himself to speak again. He didn't see how it mattered. Either way, they certainly wouldn't miss his voice.

After the door shut, Splinter turned to his eldest son, but Leo was already on his feet.

"Watch out for your brother," his sensei murmured, and the door opened and shut once again.

Leonardo found Raph in the closest of their secret sewer areas, where they had piled their flat rocks for skipping; Raphael turned his head slightly, ears tuned to his brother's footsteps, as though expecting him.

"Hey."

Leo's mouth turned halfway up in a wry, resigned smile, and sat down beside him, arms across drawn-up knees. "It wasn't fair, Raphael. I understand that."

Raph blinked several times, refusing staunchly to cry in front of his elder brother. "Why d'you sound so old right now?"

Leo held back a sigh. "Sometimes I have to be old, Raphael. For you."

Raph looked at him; his eyes had lost their opaqueness—wide and sincere, threatening to break. "I don't *want* you to be old."

Leo clamped down on his own anger, confused as it welled under his skin. "Someone has to be."

Raph stared, swallowing this, before whirling back to look at the other wall, his face gone hard again. "It's so unfair. It's so unfair." He was looking at his bandaged hand, the blood leaking through the gauze. "You have to be oldest and I have to be crazy."

Leo grabbed his arm. "Don't say that, Raphi—you're *not crazy* ."

Raph was unaffected. "Mike and Donnie think so."

"Yeah, well," Leo said, then whispered: "I don't."

A shimmering glassiness came over his little brother's eyes, refusing to look at Leo, keeping his profile to him. Leonardo, who feared his sibling's tears with a now-irrational terror, pulled him closer and gave a touch of the first comfort that came to mind, surprising even himself, looking for an answer on the other side of the immersing contact. Raphael pulled slightly away from the brush over his lips, watching with his discerning, opaque eyes, until cocking an innocent half-smile, and returning it. He ran a hesitant, feather-light touch over Leo's arms, making him shiver, and encourage more.

It didn't take long to discover the susceptibility of ticklish spots, hilarity and seriousness, the easy transformation to wrestling, sometimes fumbling and awkward, other times short and flitting, almost unnoticeable—fused with the rest of their secrets, with scavenging and adventures, with building small dams and skipping stones and wicked smiles, part of what defined them when alone, what made of them covert twins, in small pockets of time, equalized through discovery.

Notes: See? Not so bad, this first one. I hope no one's squicked yet. Reviews much appreciated… very hard chapter to write, as you can probably imagine.

Language note (the others should be self-explanatory enough):

"THIS *ga shirareru yo* !"—I can still do THIS!

Interlude: Between Worlds

Author's Note: Warnings from previous interlude chapter apply. I know you are all waiting anxiously for the next regular chapter; it will appear after this one. You may at some point in this chapter ask, "Does Leo have issues?" Yes, and we will not be blaming them entirely on parenting, but somewhat on the resentment that comes from feeling you have to constantly take care of a sibling. Here, you will see why I called these two interludes dark, and why I warned you. Welcome to the Fall of Raph and Leo. Feedback MUCH appreciated... this was a dangerous chapter to endeavor. Enjoy!

Time went by; Raphael had his own growth spurt, and turned twelve, and they were the same again. They didn't talk about their new game—it was identical to racing, sparring, running, arm-wrestling—their thing, an act of physicality, which owned no words and had no place at home, with their family, but only when together. It was never anything to be discovered, weaving its roots through all their secrets invisibly. Raphael stopped yearning for Splinter's notice, content with that life outside the den, for a few hours every day, yet his hunger to be outside grew week by week. He sometimes stopped as they walked, eyes glazed as the sounds from above reached him; we watched the least TV of all his brothers, yet he knew the most about humans. Their world haunted him; their voices awoke something sharp in his mind, stole breath from his lungs. This was his and his brother's world—though in shadow, not in darkness, ghosts in between two realities, still innocent of the woes from above, pacing, inch-by-inch, towards the answer.

In Leo's stomach was born a strange, black fire, whispering to him of a conclusion he didn't yet know—a conclusion to the odd rap beats, gunshot roars, light caresses of skin, his brother's faraway eyes, the snap of a bird's neck, sirens, motorcycle engines, smoke, touching lips turned to laughing, half-serious wrestling, challenges and dares and danger, coming back from the edge, unscathed, unscathed, unscathed… Dogmatic, his march to this conclusion, discovering

alongside his brother, his twin, as ever. In this day-by-day, Leonardo approached thirteen, began leading his brothers in basic training, correcting their stances, dragging them from bed, directing them from breakfast until dinner, while Master Splinter meditated, intervening only when necessary. Attack runs, group practice, balance work, weapons. Responsibility, adaptation. Power. Perfection. Coming down hardest on Raphael during training, expecting the best from his secret double, continuously disappointed until they returned to their camaraderie in the tunnels, and Raph would out-strip him running or climbing or through burning courage, that defiant glare in his eyes. Challenging him, every day, honing his every decision and driving Leo to distraction. Yet Raph too rose to the challenge; by night he weight-trained, building lean, ropey muscle over his gawky preteen limbs, to keep up with Leonardo's sheer balance and force of mental will.

Raphael left the den more often, afraid of the boiling writhing in his guts when Mikey taunted him, or Don made some comment about his simplicity, or Splinter lectured him to follow Leo's orders without back-talk. To him, *o-nii-san* was just another goofy twelve-year-old. Leo would find him in one of their hang-outs, and they wouldn't talk about home; Leo needed his fiery, fascinating brother, though he couldn't quite vocalize this—needed him to find the answers, though this truth was long in coming. Needed his equal, his rival, his mirror, his shadow, his ghost. His twin.

This drive towards a conclusion guided them in everything.

One day, after Leo had turned thirteen, they finished the long construction of one rather ambitious dam in the sewers, watching from the edge as fish and frogs used it for a playground, the pair of them feeling triumphant. Their voices had both begun to lower and change, sometimes making them look at each other and laugh, not recognizing themselves and needing assurance in the glance; they were together so often that the change didn't seem that jarring. They were both still skinny and gawky, Raph especially lined with awkward muscle, while Leo's laced his bones a bit more gracefully—yet they

could secretly admire it in each other by communication of sight—Raph watching Leo's smooth, calculated and easy movements, eloquent and precise curve of sword and leg—Leo astonished at the passion and force of his brother's unpredictable strikes, the challenging angle of his jaw and bold flex of muscles.

The dam kept them out long after they should have been, but Leonardo didn't seem to notice how time had gone by; they were still relaxed and at home with their dam when his brother nudged him, almost sending him catapulting into the water, giving him a smiling dare, and they jumped off the edge to wrestle. Neither of them yielded well, sending light insults and provocations back and forth with a fair share of chuckling at each other's resourceful ways of not getting pinned; by the time Raph finally slammed Leo shell-first again the piping wall, adrenaline had squeezed their pupils in tight, reducing them to tunnel vision, and both panted for breath. He watched Raphael's eyes, full of fire, open and clear, never less opaque, and Leo leaned into him, as thoughtless and fluid as doing kata, going smoothly from violence to caress in less than a second.

They were still gasping for breath, and there was something blind and mind-numb in what happened next, until Raph brushed lightly underneath Leo's shell, almost by accident, and heard a sharp intake of air, making him snap his hand back as though he'd hurt him—but Leo's arm came out, grabbing his wrist, gentle and stern, reassuring. Raphael, unsure of his actions but continuing, maintained watching his brother's hooded, faraway, fixated eyes, as Leo's breathing shallowed, quickened. Light on the other end of a tunnel, an answer on the other side of a death, life after a conclusion, yet the blackness in between perplexed him, choked and engulfed him, until he could be safely on the other side.

Splinter's voice, far away and calling for them, shattered their illusory world and jarred them apart, wide-eyed. Leo could not recall his peripheral vision, still miles from the answer—could not control his breathing, disoriented, driven by that black fire, which made him feel vaguely empty and obsessed. His heart rocked against his shell,

loud enough that Raphael must have heard it. Their father called again, echoing down sewer pipes and sounding closer.

" *Hashitai* ?" Raph asked— *Wanna run* ? "Pretend we couldn't hear?"

Leonardo looked at his brother, surprised—with a shudder, he answered: "Yes."

Raphael grabbed his brother's forearm, and they ran from the dam and its loud trickle, knowing it would shield the sounds of their feet and impede their sensei long enough for a fighting chance, dodging through tunnels they knew like their own skins, breakneck and eventually stifling laughter again, until they stumbled into one of their hideouts, knowing they were safe. Leo panted away a fresh surge of adrenaline, energized, feeling the edge of the obsession dulled by the exercise.

"I… I don't…" he breathed, smiling. "I don't know why I did that."

Raphael chuckled. "Welcome to *my* life. You okay?"

Leo frowned. "Yeah, of course. I've run farther than that before, Raphi."

Raph blinked at him, but left it alone. He let out a breath of laughter. "Mr. Perfect doesn't wanna go back to training?"

Leo shook his head, smile gone. "It's… I just…"

"Can't be perfect all the time." It was more a completion of his own sentence than a statement of Raph's own. His little brother's face watched him, hard but perceptive. No. Raphael wasn't simple. Leo rolled so they sat side-by-side, instead of facing each other.

"Just a few more minutes," he whispered. "Then we have to go back." He listened to his brother's steady breathing, until he realized Raph's head had fallen against his shoulder, giving him that steady,

mesmerizing sound in sleep. Leo didn't rush to wake him. The fire dimmed in his stomach, only a dull roar, clawing at his insides for the end to an unfinished sentence, yet slightly distant, like a memory.

He stood in the alleyway, where it was dark instead of light, pressed against a wall, watching Raphael's glittering eyes, showing him that half-smothered fire. As he watched, Leo realized the flames burned down in his brother's stomach, just as they did in his own, though they had different ways of feeding the inferno, different paths to meeting its ends. It was so much easier to feed it together, a few hours every day. The alley became a tunnel, ringed by human voices, shouting, bright cacophony, a wrath of answers too numerous to be understood. Then Raphael was shaking him, with wide eyes.

The next thing Leo knew he was back in the hideout, looking up into his brother's face who, panicked, crouched above him.

"Leo! Wake up! Master Splinter's gonna *kill* us!"

Leonardo sat up, disoriented, gazing around. All at once it hit him.

"Oh, my god… how long've we been asleep? What time is it?" His eyes fell on his younger brother. "Kill *us* ? No—he'll give *you* chores —he'll kill *me* . Come on!"

Raph argued as they ran. "It's both of our stupid faults! I don't see how your being a little older makes you all magically responsible for everything."

Leo paused and whirled on Raph. "In case you hadn't noticed, Raphael, I'm in charge of *you* , and I have been for a long time. That means that if we're out later than we should be, even if I didn't mean it—and I did—then I take the blame!"

Raph clenched his fists. "I don't need you babysitting me! You're no better'n I am at anything outside the dojo!"

Leo's voice went quiet and dangerous. "Don't you realize you can't back yourself up? No one listens to you except me. You couldn't be five feet from home if I wasn't along for the ride—so what does it matter if we're practically the same age? In the end, I'm responsible for you, I have to think for you, I could keep you at the den or have you train all day or make you do nothing but dishes, and *you don't get that* !" Leo backed away, his voice breaking. "And when you do, you'll hate me."

Raph gazed at him, open and clear-eyed. "Out here and up top's what's real, Leo, and here we're the same. Master Splinter can let you be in charge all he wants, but in the real world, *we're the same* . That's what I see."

Leo shook his head. "There's only one world, Raphi."

Raphael smiled daringly. "Exactly."

They rushed in the den door, and nearly bumped smack into Donnie, who was standing in front of the entryway, a short-range walkie-talkie in his hands. Without changing a rather stern expression or pausing to greet them, he clicked on a channel and spoke.

"Sewerzilla, this is Home Dweller—the eagles have landed, over."

Mikey's voice crackled on the other side. "Bomb-diggity, Home Dweller. We'll be back in zero-five, over."

Raph rolled his eyes, while Leo glanced at the clock—10:30 PM. They'd been missing for several hours past curfew, in the tunnels long into the time of sewer maintenance and nocturnal predators. Donnie lowered the walkie-talkie.

"You guys are in *so much trouble* ," he said, almost in disbelief, and walked forward. He had a pin-knife in his other hand. "Which one wants to be the victim and which one the hero?"

Leo blinked. "Huh? What are you talking about—put he knife away, Donatello."

Raph grinned. "Doncha get it? Donnie cuts one've us up like we got attacked by something and we get our story straight."

Donnie gave them a half-smile. "Astute observation, little brother. Maybe you're not as hopeless as I thought. You ready for a crocodile bite?"

Leo extended an arm. "I said *put the knife away* , Donatello. We're not going to lie to our sensei—we broke the rules and we'll accept the consequences."

Donnie sighed. "Suit yourself. You survive this and I'll be amazed."

When Mikey led Master Splinter back through the door, the old rat's face appeared stretched between extremes of worry and anger, even with his strong capability to keep that face impassive. His eyes fell automatically upon Leonardo, who matched them, kneeling respectfully. Raphael, balling his fists, stepped forward.

"It's my fault," he said doggedly, almost defiantly, desperately. He was standing in front of his eldest brother, who stood back up in amazement upon his words.

Master Splinter's face softened a bit, and he came forward then, laying a land on Raph's shoulder. Only then could his son see the palpable fear in the old rat's eyes.

"Raphael… my strong son. I have spent the last hours in terror—believing you were in danger. Ever you walk the line between our world and another… ever you slip away from me. I was afraid I had lost you for good."

Raphael blinked at him, feeling newly desperate at the deep sadness in his adopted father's eyes. "Please. It was my fault. It really was. I

persuaded him—it was my idea. If one of us has to take responsibility, let it be me."

"Raphael"—Leo tried, but stopped, swallowing.

Splinter's eyes remained on Raph. "Your brother holds power over you. That you cannot see it, keeps the two of you close. You are fortunate in this. But you must let me deal with it. Now go"—he nodded towards the kitchen—"and do your chores. You are grounded until your brother is permitted to leave the den again, unless I accompany you."

But Raphael wouldn't—or couldn't—budge from in front of Leo. He looked close to tears, and his croaking voice reflected as much. "But it was *my fault* . This isn't fair."

"Raphi…" Leo whispered, low but strong. "Go."

Raph turned to stare at him, searchingly, and at last yielded, storming into the kitchen and collecting dishes, his face cold and hard as stone, eyes burning. Mikey and Donnie backed away from Leo and Splinter, joining their brother at the kitchen table. Without further ado, the sensei lightly smacked his eldest over the face with the butt of his walking stick, a strange fury in his eyes. Leo kneeled again, not letting out a peep of pain.

"I must confess, Leonardo. I rely very heavily on you, even now, when you are so young," Splinter said, in a voice made slightly breathless by anger. "Perhaps too much. Do you believe that?"

Leo shook his head. "No. I am honored by the responsibility. I made a bad decision and a worse mistake tonight. I'm sorry I failed."

Splinter banged his walking stick into the ground. "And you offer no explanation? For why you worried your brothers and your father for hours into the night, why you led Raphael in breaking the rules and broke the trust that keeps him under your responsibility? Why you

put him in danger, when he trusts you so much he would offer to take the blame from off your shoulders?"

Raph, watching with a dish in his hands, winced noticeably. Leo didn't answer, keeping his silence, their secrets.

Splinter breathed in, calming himself. "Do you not understand the myriad of dangers that open up at night, underground, when your training is incomplete and I cannot find you, when I have no idea if you are safe? You are forbidden from leaving the den for a month. Now—into the dojo, and you will know the pain you have caused our family. I am sorry I have to be so hard on you, Leonardo, for the good of you all."

Leo stood quietly, avoiding his father's eyes, and followed him into the dojo, accepting. So much taller now—growing more elegant, easy footsteps, smooth musculature. Raphael felt a strange ache; he would die for his brother—but he couldn't save him from this. They heard only periodic sounds of impact, rhythmic, followed by silence, no cries of anguish, no indication of Leonardo's pain. At last, the dojo door slid open, and Leo walked slowly, but steadily, out into the den, towards the bunkroom. Donnie and Mikey, as well as Raph, who was finishing his chores, watched him as he went: bruised around the arms and legs, his eyes straight ahead, making contact with none of them. Raphael dried his hands and went after him.

Leo was already in bed, face to the wall, when his brother came in, the room dark. Raph shut the door behind himself, and sat on the edge of Leo's bottom bunk, below his own.

"I would've taken it if he'd let me, Leo… I would've…"

"You're so stupid, Raphael. You should've kept your dumb mouth shut," Leo said into the wall. "You just made it worse."

Raph fought against his own pride, coming closer—he wouldn't have done it for any other brother, for any other reason, at any other point

in his life, back or forward three years. He placed a hand on Leo's arm. "I love you, big bro."

Leo covered Raphael's hand with his own. "I know. But you… you don't see—today really was my fault. And all of this—I deserved it. I failed Master Splinter by betraying his trust, and he *needs* to be able to trust me so much, and now we're stuck here for a month."

"Don't, Leo. It was both of us—we both ran, we both fell asleep. The same. Okay?"

Leonardo turned away from the wall, to look at him. "That's why I… You're the only one, who doesn't see it. It's all leveled out to you, the way the world works. It's fair with you. I'm just… just Leo in your eyes."

Raph remained silent, in the dark room. Leo sat up, looking for his brother's glittering eyes—leaned in, and brushed their lips together. It was a moment of colliding realities, a compromise of worlds, as Raphael pushed back, smiling. Leo's muscles felt soft from the bruises, now soothed under the light touch. They created a small space, where again their reality above settled like a blanket around them, equalizing and safe. Leo pulled away, but leaned their foreheads against each other.

"Thanks, Raph."

Raphael laughed. "What—not Raphi? Not *Raphael* ?"

Leo smiled warmly. "You're getting big, little brother."

In that month they were stuck at home, while Splinter accompanied Donnie and Mikey, teaching them the art of scavenging, Raphael turned thirteen, and he and Leo did equal parts training and a lot of television. They spent hours in the practice room, Leo meditating silently, while his brother went at the punching bag, beating out a constant rhythm: *It's not fair* , *it's not fair* . He would come out of the

haze, to see Leonardo, holding the bag to stop it, giving him a wry grin.

One day near the end of their sentence, they both finally collapsed on the couch after Leo had them training brutally long; within seconds of turning on the TV, Raph had fallen asleep, exhausted and content in the near-empty den. Leo sat in the middle of the sofa, after smiling at his brother's sleeping face; he breezed through the channels, landing on a CNN news special about Japanese Noh drama, leaning back happily. The program ended after a promise for another cultural special like it, so Leo stayed on the otherwise boring news channel in case of catching it. News about celebrities, school shootings, presidents. The human world confounded him when he couldn't stand just at the threshold, listening to the buzz of voices that helped to give it sense. He was close to dozing off himself when the next report caught his attention.

" *Yes, thank you, Susan. A SHOCKING story today, here at a family home at the edge of Durango, Colorado—a small, quiet city in the American mid-west—or is it? In this seemingly wholesome town has come a stunning upset. A fifteen-year-old boy was removed today from his home, after a teacher at the local elementary school reported that his twelve-year-old brother told one of his friends that his brother has been fondling and touching him inappropriately for at least several months. Dr. Stephen Bobrow of the University of Colorado had this to say.* " The scene cut to an expert, an old man with glasses. Leo leaned forward, blinking. " *Sociologists report that such incestuous experimentation is not uncommon—at least 46 of incest is between siblings and entirely consensual, fading as children grow older.* " Back to the news woman, getting interviews. An old woman. " *Oh, it was such a surprise—I remember those boys runnin' around, playing tag—I never thought* bleep *would ever touch his brother like that, it's just so shocking, so horrible!* "Another cut to some interviews of outraged or disbelieving residents, then back to the reporter. Leo's breathing became shallow. " *As the young man has reached the age of consent, social workers made the decision yesterday to remove him from the home to protect his younger*

siblings; this morning, the state filed charges of sexual abuse, citing that, despite seeming consent, difference in age may have rendered the younger brother's agreement a result of coercion. More on this disturbing story as it develops. Kate Smithson—CNN, Durango ."

Leo's mind raced, creating odd webs and pathways. He saw the couple in the alley, heard their words.

Bad. Touching. Horrible. Fondling. Shocking.

Remove. Separated. Abuse. Coercion.

Leonardo found he was trembling, with a nameless fear. What they did had words—it had moral equivalents—and in the human world, it had math and statistics and phenomena and consequences. He picked up Donnie's dictionary, looking up some of the words—coercion, sexual abuse. He looked at his brother's sleeping face again, feeling sick and empty. Without his knowledge, part of his mind began working, devising, sculpting reasons and validations and postulates—a way out of that empty feeling, without destroying what they had. Raphael went on sleeping, calm breathing, oblivious. Leo envied him terribly, and this feeling alone troubled him. For once, he wanted not to know something. To un-know it, to release the dogma. Perhaps if he were anyone but himself, he could've seen the differences, found reasons why it wasn't what the humans said it had to be. Instead, his mind turned on him, stabs of self-hatred and anger and fear without a face. The boys had been separated because the younger one told someone, betrayed his brother.

They must keep it secret. That was the only way.

Their sentence passed over, and now thirteen-year-old Raphael could go into the sewers for a good distance on his own for the first time. He still scavenged with Leo, but for a while they only played tag and wrestled, never moving into that particular game, as though one of them were steering away from it, and Leo wasn't sure it was himself. Raph would disappear in the evenings, until Leonardo came out to find him.

One evening near curfew, as the sun was setting above, he found Raphael in a high tunnel, sitting against the wall, below a storm drain—the pipe here was dry from a day of summer heat. Kids were out of school, and it promised to be a warm night; the street above smelled like gasoline, hot dogs, mustard, smog, and ozone, when tap water hit the pavement. Leo felt slightly hurt to see his brother out without him—when he'd first been allowed, Leo supposed that after the novelty wore off he'd stop, but Raph had a loner streak in him. In fact, it seemed almost that Leo was being avoided.

Some of what he felt must have showed on his face, because when Raph looked down from the lit street he started with an apology.

"Hey—I would've asked you with me, but you were meditating with Master Splinter."

Leo shook his head, embarrassed his brother had noticed so easily. He sat down beside him.

"Almost time to go in."

Raph grinned, playfully sarcastic. "Yeah, thanks, warden."

Leo grinned and punched his arm lightly. "By the way, Master Splinter wants me to go over your katas with you one more time before dinner. He seems to think I'll make them more understandable."

Raph frowned. "I got them okay today. I'll ask him about them in practice tomorrow."

Leo looked at him strangely. "But—Raph, he told me to go over them with you."

Raph was troubled. "You don't have to if you don't want to. You trained a lot today—we couldn't even go scavenging. Mikey and Donnie had to do it."

Leo laughed a little derisively. "Is that what this is about? You're gonna slack off training with me because I didn't go scavenging with you today?"

Raph looked bewildered, then snorted. "No. I'm just sayin'—you trained a lot today, and you don't have to worry about *my* kata on top a' yours. That's all."

Leo was quiet for a minute, then shrugged. "I don't mind."

Raph looked from the sky to the ground. "Yeah, right. Then you get mad at me after normal training if I don't get it right. It's not your job, Leo."

"It *is* my job."

"Well, maybe it shouldn't be!" the outburst was louder than Raphael had intended—it seemed like he'd been brooding in this longer than he'd made it seem.

" *What* ?" Leo glared, astounded. "Who else would do it? What, are you jealous or something?"

Raph squinted at his older brother. "I'd never be jealous of what being older brother and our leader does to you. But I'd take the job, any day." He visibly stopped himself. "I hate watching you kill yourself to impress Master Splinter—I hate it when he punishes you more than me—I hate *all of it* ."

Leo never understood better than on that day—all others after were misted with pride and mistrust and misunderstanding. But he saw in his little brother's eyes a protectiveness as fierce as his own, and something— *love* —filled his chest, making sounds fade in and out. He was disturbed for a moment—after over a year of it, his first inclination in response to affection for Raphael was to touch him. He felt shame now, and terror, and it had kept him from being so outward—but this time he acted, overwhelmed, without thinking. It was the only knowing kiss they would ever have.

Raphael hesitated before responding, which, on reflection, was strange for him; he was the type to dive heedlessly into everything, wild and hungry, eager for more experience. His response was shy, tentative, like the first time, but pursued Leo, trying to make it last longer—Raphael surprised him, after that, when he was the first to pull away, almost abruptly. They looked at each other for a very long moment, while Raph swallowed, as though trying to summon up words for something.

"Raph…"

Raphael shook his head, speaking before he lost it.

"I… I don't think we should do this anymore."

The bottom dropped out of Leo's stomach.

"Do… do what?"

Raph continued to shake his head. "You'll get in trouble. If Master Splinter ever finds out, he'll be so mad. And it would be fine, if I didn't know he'd—if he didn't blame you. I would take my half of the punishment. But he'll separate us, just like those kids. He'll have to."

Leo looked around; he had a hand on his brother's arm, and could vividly feel the blood pounding through his veins, the warmth in his skin. Of the whirl of emotions—panic, dread, surprise—one started to surface, irrationally. *This* . Saying it out loud somehow made it no longer implicit, no longer a secret. They had never plucked it out of their lives in the tunnels, tried to disentangle it from the weave of secrets they had together, from the code of their identity. So easy, so sickening, to hear it aloud. But it tinged everything, permeated every secret, every story, every hideout, every inside joke and treasure. Betrayal.

"You—you heard the news story? Why'd you act like you were asleep?" Leo asked, bewildered by the rush of crimson passing over his vision, inverting his world so quickly after the last time.

Raph smiled, confused. "Leo, I do that all the time. You know that."

"Not to *me* you don't!" It came out sounding different than Leo intended—starting as betrayal in his gut, and passing out of his lips with the sound of retribution to it. He realized his grip had tightened on his brother. Hearing it, so real, tightened around his heart. So Raphael knew. "I'm… Master Splinter's gonna kill me…"

Raph frowned. "I kinda thought we agreed not to do it anymore, you know… without sayin' anything. But I won't tell, Leo."

Leonardo didn't know how to react anymore; he raged at himself, confused at everything he was feeling. He wanted this to continue, and it sickened his heart to want it. His stomach hurt every time he thought of it, knots forming in his core. He dreaded the consequences, and *hated* … He hated Raphael for being younger, not really his twin, and unable to take the same burden on his shoulders—hated himself for all of it, for keeping it going, for not knowing the right thing to do—why didn't Bushido cover this, why had no one told him—how could he get in trouble for not knowing, for being unable to go backwards once he did? He hated the uncertainty, unsure of how far his power had made it possible to go. His fury found an outlet; his peripheral vision began to contract.

"How do I know that? All you ever do is lie to us—you keep everything you think to yourself, and wander out here alone, and pretend like you're stupid and crazy and not listening—and for what? You *want* Splinter's attention, at least *I* know that much! Tell him about this and you'll get it! I'm the one who'll get in trouble—you've got no reason not to!"

After several moments of ringing silence, Raphael's face hardened, and black anger stole into his amber eyes. He stuttered from sheer rage, of the likes Leo had seldom seem his brother produce. "You think I'd— *you* , out of everyone—you don't know a single stupid thing about me!"

Some large part of Leonardo knew his brother, and knew none of it was true—but it felt good to say, because he also knew what Raph's reaction would be. He blocked the punch, before they both rolled over, locked in combat, now more serious than the play wrestling that they were accustomed to. Leo managed to pin him for a moment, below the fading light from above; the sun gleamed in his brother's eyes.

"We—we're not like the humans," he hissed, his mind stumbling upon all its silent justifications. "We're above their stupid laws—we have honor, and we have each other, and the shadows. It's just another secret, Raphi…"

Raphael looked longingly up at the sky, past Leo and to the reality beyond them. "There's only one world, Leo. *You* told me that."

Leo felt a curtain fall between them—he couldn't understand, couldn't see past his brother's opaque eyes, reflecting light and nothing else—could no longer see that fascinating fire, couldn't fix himself in his brother's line of sight. Then, with a click, their gazes met.

"I know why they say it's wrong, though," Raph said, quietly. "You treat me different than Don and Mikey while we're practicing. It's made us different from them. We're not… not always actin' like brothers anymore."

"That's because you're my fr"—Leo stopped, realizing the truth of it even as he said it. *My friend* . Out here, they had become friends. He could tell it hurt Raph more than anything to say what he did next.

"We're not *friends* , Leo! We don't get to *have* friends! Master Splinter will find out about this eventually. I wouldn't care, because I know it's different. But it means everything to you, to be big brother, and you'd take the punishment, and we wouldn't be allowed to be *anything* anymore, except leader and soldier. I'll take brothers over nothin'. We're stuck with each other forever—we can't be separate from Donnie and Mikey, we can't pretend humans are so much

different from us, that we're the only ones in the world. Even if we… if we have to start over."

Start over. That was when Leo felt it, how even wrestling and fighting and hurting each other, how even that had been colored by what they did, how everything transported the secret with it, how everything fed the black fire inside of him, and the sick sensation at the pit of his stomach. Terror griped him, as he felt their world dissolving away, felt his best friend melting under his grasp, replaced only by the remnants of his hated, unfathomable, emotional crybaby little brother, who had always followed him and taken his abuse and watched him with wide eyes. The twin was his friend, the boy with something just beyond the simple defiance in his eyes, reason behind the passion and perception in his blank looks, who knew Leo like no one ever had or ever would. And that person was retreating, dying, leaving him so little to hang onto. Leo began to hear voices—the TV, the couple in the alley, Master Splinter. This was bad—and abusive—and horrible—and *his fault* .

They had been in a relaxed position by this time, and Raphael moved to help his brother up—Leo grasped his arm, still staring at the last spot he'd been looking in—sick and trapped, guilty and suddenly alone, rage and horror fanning at his face—he made a sudden motion, and they were fighting again, in earnest. Leo was shocked at the violence of it, and at his own strength, superseding his sibling who could bench-press far more than he, driven in an animal desperation toward that conclusion he couldn't fathom and couldn't name. In a haze, he deliberately hit at the nerves in Raphael's arms, temporarily paralyzing them—when he still felt struggles, he picked his brother up a few inches and slammed him back down, shell first, into the pipe.

"Leo— *Jesus* , I told you I wouldn't tell—why're you still freaking out?" Raph protested.

Leo glanced at him; his words worked for him, slipping out. "I know you won't."

He pinned the wrists with one hand over Raphael's head, and heard himself say, in the same way he had once done before tickling his brother at eleven, though his voice sounded somewhat hollow:

"Got ya."

Raph stared at him, surprised, then started to laugh. "You worried me there for a minute"—then stopped, his smile slowly melting, when he saw Leonardo's face. So seldom was the eldest ever out of control—his pupils reduced to pinpricks and letting in little light, shallow breathing, his muscles all tensed—Raphael stared, as if frozen.

Out here, they would share some of the burden. Leo reached under Raphael's shell and returned the unfinished touch that had obsessed him since it had happened, making his brother know at least once how it felt, the fire gnawing at his insides. Raph turned his head away, eyes squeezed shut, and silence reigned over the passage, where darkness and shadows took over the last scraps of sunset light from above.

A small sound fought its way out of Raphael's throat, halfway between the hitched breath of a sob and a groan, sobering Leonardo, and he stiffened, the pipe and the world around him gradually coming back, in figments and shadows and realizations. He removed his hand, only half-aware of what he had been doing, and looked up, to see his brother cringing, his face as far left as he could possible make it against the ground, his body tensed up. His brother was in pain—waves of protectiveness stole over Leo, maddening—what had happened, why was his little brother shaking, what was hurting him—

"Raph… look at me. Please."

Raphael did not turn his head, but his eyes opened—screened by tears of humiliation, and shame, and betrayal.

A voice in the back of Leo's mind, vigilant and aware and watchful, whispered: *You went too far* . He felt strangely empty, drained of the dizzying whirl of emotions giving him onslaughts before—all he wanted was to cover his brother and protect him, and take the poison away. He realized he was still holding Raphael's wrists, and dropped them, surprised—he stumbled backwards and off of his plastron. Raph rolled over, in the direction of his turned head, huddled into himself for a moment—before getting to his feet, desperately fighting tears.

Leo would have dropped to his knees at that moment, feeling he might cry himself—words escaped him, all but a few.

"Raphi… please… *Please don't tell Master Splinter* …"

Raphael didn't look at him, but his voice was strong and sincere, and full of despair. "I won't. No one would believe me over you anyways."

And walked away from Leo, down the tunnel.

Leonardo watched Raph go, and felt acutely his own power—and it sickened him.

Missing Pages

Author's Notes: Hey, guys. Well, it's the time all English majors at UCLA loathe: paper time. So I have been working extra hard to get these chapters done as quickly as I could. I'm sorry these updates are so slow… But this chapter is nice and long, and the next one is almost done and equally as long, so enjoy. Here's hoping my Milton paper is… cohesive. Unlike my brain. And that I don't choke on my Japanese creative skit. Weee, Mikey happy fun time for all you fans who missed him in the last two torturous chapters!

For the year and a half that Leo was gone, Mikey became an early-riser. He worked himself into a habit, listening in the dawn hour for a familiar sound downstairs. His ears attuned to it, the rhythm of the den door sliding open, and the slow, heavy tread, of his tired and secretive older brother. He would pretend to be sleeping until Raphael climbed up into own his bunk, dreaming before he touched the pillow. Then the world was Michelangelo's, like a passing of the baton, after he heard his brother breathing, and watched his shell for a half-hour, as the morning dragged on.

It was Mikey's suspicion that since Leo's departure and elevation, Raph had been out somewhere training himself to close the gap, to make up for not being chosen as well. His musculature almost doubled, and even in walking, he seemed always at the ready. Splinter had a vigilant eye, but never stopped him, never asked, as though he knew or had some idea. Mikey, who was a younger brother, had some idea as well. Raph missed Leo, and the only way to connect with him was to follow his shadow, obsessively, focused insanely on the task. Michelangelo wished his brother could let it go, or walk the path with he and Donnie, though he supposed Donatello's choice of dealing with the absence did not jive well with Raph's. Mikey followed Donnie. Raphael, in the back of his loyal, opaque heart, followed Leo.

A morning came when Raphael did not come back at his usual hour, just as the sun was rising. Mikey waited, breathing and stopping himself from thinking about the stomach-eating emotions dragging through his system like a slow-working drug. Raph would come back. He always came back.

An hour slipped by; Donnie would be waking up soon, to eat breakfast, train, and jump on the IT Tech Support line. Mikey still did not get out of bed, listening to his brother breath in sleep below him. A ticking bomb, that Raphael must preclude to avoid getting a lecture.

At long last, the door below slid open, and he listened for those familiar steps; but they fell this time unevenly, heavier than usual—steps of pain. Instead of moving towards the bunkroom, they stopped, swerved, and fell upon the tile in the bathroom instead. Mikey swallowed, coming to a decision; quietly, he rolled off the top bunk, landing catlike beside Donatello, and deftly turned off the alarm. Then, light steps, he padded to the bathroom door, only half-shut, and stood, to see Raphael.

He was breathing unevenly through teeth gritted against making sound, the tap on, washing blood and dirt away from a slash running from inner forearm almost to the shoulder blade, where it stopped abruptly. The cut was at an awkward angle, on the back of the arm, running around it as though the inflictor had been trying to avoid something—the slash of Raph's sai, no doubt. The amount of blood Raph was losing looked exorbitant; Mikey gasped, making his brother's head turn.

"Mikey? ... Shoulda known you'd be up right now…"

Getting past his shock, Michelangelo walked straight into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. He wasted no time grabbing a wad of towels and putting pressure on the gash, ignoring his sibling's taken-aback expression.

"Whoa, dude, what happened? You get in a nasty fight with a lawn mower or somethin'?"

Raph cringed. "Very funny. I just… wasn't bein' careful an' I ran into a buncha punks on my way home. I was tired and I just got sloppy. Let 'em knife me like a Thanksgiving turkey, right in my blind spot."

Mikey had a feeling Raph wasn't telling the whole truth; he figured, with an inner snicker, that the whole story was either less than flattering or so reckless and stupid Raph didn't want to tell it. Didn't matter. He'd probably looked cool doing it. "Well, my brother, you're lucky you're not gonna need stitches, 'cuz you gotta get in bed before Donnie wakes up and figures out what time you dragged your butt home. I'll get the towels in cold water an' he'll never know by the time he's awake."

Raph frowned; he'd been expecting some teasing in exchange for the help. "It's 'bout seven—isn't he usually awake by now?"

Mikey chuckled, putting adhesives on the wound to keep it from splitting with Raph's movements. "Not *this* morning, bro." He looked up to see a strange expression on his brother's face, Raphael opening his mouth, as though to say something.

A creak down the hall, Master Splinter's door, the shuffling sound of their father's footsteps walking almost silently across the floor, past the bathroom, peering in the bunkroom. Raph shut his eyes tight. "Shit."

"Relax, Raph—Master Splinter would've said somethin' by now."

Raphael blinked, trying to flex his muscles, and wincing. "Damn this arm… Can't believe I got caught like that…"

Mikey laughed quietly. "You should think about stayin' in more often. Now Donnie's got the IT line, I could use help in my Cowabunga Carl business."

Raphael sighed; Mikey hadn't heard him sound so tired in a long while. "You likin' the clown business, Mikey?"

"I'm likin' the free pizza and the cash. Kids aren't too bad either, usually."

"Yeah," Raph said after an interval, vaguely.

"You're gonna go back out tonight with this huge thing, aren't ya?" Mikey asked, sounding a shade colder. Maybe Raph was imagining it.

"Ever stopped me before?"

Mikey grinned, weakly. "No. Usually Leo's job."

Raph's eyes hardened, and his brother regretted it, but pushed a little further.

"Maybe… you should call or somethin', in the middle of the night, just to tell Donnie where you're at"—

Raphael interrupted him, his voice harsh. "So Leo gets to disappear ten thousand miles away without a word for months, and I still gotta check in every few hours? Get real, Mikey. Not gonna happen."

Leo isn't the one who courts Death every night .

Though none of them really knew that... but it was Leo. He was probably fine. Mikey bound the upper arm, and Raph bound the lower. At length, Raphael sighed.

"Thanks, little bro."

Mikey grinned, less fulsomely than usual. "It's what we're here for, dude. Leo's not your only brother, ya know."

"Yeah," Raph said again; noncommittally; almost sadly, not matching Mikey's eyes.

It was the closest Raphael ever came to telling his little brother the truth, telling him about the Nightwatcher. But kids and pizza, rising early, didn't mix well with the world of shadows and violence into which he'd sunk. The slash Mikey helped him bandage and hide was an act of retribution, for a death at Raphael's hands. The life had been a murderer's and a rapist's, but still it was a life, with family, and the Nightwatcher had taken it, smashing in the skull, sending bone fragments flying, mid-act as the criminal finished his pleasure and began to choke the life out of his victim. The rage that had overtaken the face behind the vigilante had a power of its own, and in a moment that terrible existence was snuffed out, never to rape or murder again. Raphael would do it over and over, until one day by some magic no bastard would endeavor to unzip his pants or pull out a knife again, struck dumb with fear. It was the only weapon that worked.

Raphael was working against the universe, and someday, something had to give—or something had to break. And he could not be proud, not when he looked into his little brother's innocent face. The next time he was injured, he didn't come home to nurse the wounds—he stockpiled first aid supplies in the abandoned garage where he hid his gear, and slept against his bike, not knowing what else to do, trapped and facing the clinch alone. The first time, Mikey laid in bed for a long while, staring at the ceiling, and at his brothers' empty bunks on the other wall. Raph's on top, Leo's on the bottom, one messy and the other perfectly-made. They could both be dead, somewhere out in the world, choosing, by some sixth sense, to give in at the same moment, separate and together. Selfish, secretive pricks.

His eyes fell on the dusty old action figures on the shelves above his brothers' beds. Wolverine above Raph's, Beast above Leo's. They must've held onto them for ten years, the dramatic nut-jobs. Once he saw them, Mikey suddenly turned over. Easier just not to care. He was not a liar by nature, but then, his brothers had never left before. Not like this.

Easy to lie, and tell himself he wasn't jealous that Raphael, who held himself at arm's length from Mikey, who wanted his notice and his attention, was controlled on puppet strings by Leonardo a half-a-world away, who exerted no effort to do so. Raphael revolved around Leo, whether in spite or love or a mixture thereof, while his other brothers might as well have been shades, despite standing so close to him and experiencing the same doubt, the same restlessness. Mikey knew how Raph felt especially. Yet he doubted his brother knew or would even care. Too many years, perhaps, of telling mean jokes because he was jealous, and wanted Raph to know that his little brother saw him, and liked him, and thought he was cool. Too many years of Raph and Leo living in their own world of adventures and rivalry. Too many years of always being two and two, instead of four.

Easy to lie again, when he leapt at Leo upon his return, dying of happiness to see him—to lie once more, forgiving Raph nearly every time he saw him for his own dishonesty. Mikey was the clown. His life was a mask, to see and not affect. He supposed that was his and Donatello's affinity—eyes without opinions, perceiving without a voice. Endless daily deceptions.

The four brothers returned from their defeat on the surface, and without speaking knew they would be pulling an all-nighter. Fatigued yet full of restless, itching energy, feeling the failure creeping upon them like a worm. Donnie went instinctively to his computers, scanning in all Lizzie's drawings to try and figure out what it was exactly she had seen that the Foot wanted. Leo and Raph got out a map of Manhattan, trying to agree on where the messenger had taken them when they'd been "invited" by Karai for a friendly chat. Mikey marched ahead, concluding his conversation with Donatello—from the sound of it, not on the best note—to make coffee.

"Raph—I'm telling you, we *did not* go that far east!" Leo argued, erasing the pencil line almost as soon as Raphael made it.

"Hey, Jungle Boy, I know the Eastside like the back a' my own fist, an' that warehouse was"—

"How the hell would you know the back of your own fist that intimately if it's always in someone else's face?"

"Oh ho—look who thought he grew a sense of humor in the Amazon."

"I was in Costa Rica, *not* the Amazon, Raphael."

"Guy givin' me geography lessons when he probably can't even tell me how far past Canal street we were the other week…"

"Well, Raphael, I'm sorry if my scope of Manhattan has been experienced mostly below ground while you saw fit to waltz around up top for eighteen months, but I'll thank you to know that I do *not* remember crossing Canal, and I think I would have noticed."

"Don't *even* start gettin' hoity-toity wi' me on this, Leo—we were past Canal already when we started trainin', remember?"

Leo whirled on his other brothers. "Donnie, help me out here."

Donatello gave him a deadpan look. "Well, actually, if either of you had thought to have your cell phones *on* and *with you* that night, I could've checked your GPS records and this wouldn't be a problem. Moreover, you could have hit your distress buttons for me and Mikey, and Raphael wouldn't have nearly got his shell caved in, to say nothing of your infection. But since you both insist on being cowboys"—

"Do you three *ever* shut up?"

Leo, Raph, and Donnie all turned, in slow surprise, to look at the kitchen, and Michelangelo's angry face.

"Raph *does* know Manhattan like the back of his hand, and we all know Donnie's right about the stupid cell phones, so what's the

stupid *point* ?"

Raphael sighed, but sent Leo a look to keep him from answering. He stood with the map in his hands. "Bro, the point is we're a little freaked out and this is a better way a' blowin' off steam than much else, so if you wanna add t' the pool without givin' yourself a brain aneurism, be my guest."

Mikey snapped his mouth shut, glaring. "Does anyone even have plan?"

Raph scowled. "Do *you* ?"

Mikey blinked a few times before looking away. Donnie spoke from the alcove. "I don't have a plan per se, but I'll say this much: we can't do anything unless we have some way of protecting ourselves from those poisoned weapons. Raph's chains may have worked when you guys had Lizzie with you, but something tells me they won't if we go in without something valuable."

"Sounds like we need armor," Mikey muttered, staring at the kitchen floor.

"There *is* no armor that fits us, Mikey, and we have pretty limited time here"—

Leo cleared his throat. "Well, I don't know about four of us… but I do know there's full armor that would fit *one* of us."

Raph folded his arms, almost responding, but Donnie preempted him. "You are *not* suggesting what I think you are, Leo."

Leo shook his head. "There's nothing mystical about the armor, Donatello, that turns someone into a vigilante the moment they put it on."

"They was *not* my point"—

"No."

The answer came from both Raphael and Michelangelo, simultaneously.

Mikey spoke first. "Ya can't just dress one've us up like the Nightwatcher and go walkin' around—people'll think he's come back, and they'll think… they'll think he'll fight bad guys again. That's not fair."

Raphael, after staring gape-jawed at his little brother before shaking it off, had a slightly darker response. "The Nightwatcher made a lot a' enemies, Leo. The last coupla months they been crawlin' out a' the woodwork again, marchin' around like roaches, an' the revenge talk is startin' up. They see my helmet in the wrong part a' town, the turtle wearin' it can kiss his ass goodbye."

Leo smiled. "Yes, but Raphael, the advantage here is that *you* know precisely what parts of town those might be, don't you?"

Raph chuckled sardonically. "It's pretty much the whole town, Leo. All a' Manhattan, half a' Brooklyn, part a' Queens, eastern part a' Staten Island and even a few parts a' Jersey. Even if I haven't been there, they've seen me on the news puttin' a cousin or a homey in chains and hangin' 'em from a telephone pole. No one's goin' out in that armor."

"And here I thought you stuck to Harlem," Donnie said, dryly. "At least now I know nearly *all* the boroughs want your head on plate."

Leo became serious, looking between Raph and Mikey. "I'm surprised at the two of you. I wouldn't think something like the Nightwatcher's past life would stop you from wanting to save Liz."

Mikey and Raph almost exchanged a glance, before the former remembered how angry he was and glared at the fridge instead.

"Raph's probably just afraid a' putting the suit on again, like it has some mind control powers and he'll go all berserker on us…"

Raph closed his eyes; Donnie finally snapped at his brother, rolling his chair out with a hard expression.

"Maybe *you're* just scared of seeing your hero again, Mikey, and remembering it's your brother."

Raph cut in, exasperated. " *Hey* ! I'm not talkin' about some psychoanalysis bullshit—I'm sayin' it's dangerous to wear that suit in Manhattan these days—which means the only one who's puttin' it on is *me* , and not a word about me goin' berserker or whatever else, ya got it? An' you make one more crack about it, Mikey, an' I swear to god I'll deck ya. The fact I nearly skewered Leo ain't something t' throw around lightly in conversation."

Mikey grabbed his arm as he went past, eyes flashing. "You—you just said how dangerous it is to wear the armor, dude. So why're ya doin' it?"

Raph wrenched his arm away. "To save Liz, ya freakin' schitzo! Tell me what ya want me to say!"

"You don't… you don't have the *right* to wear that armor anymore!" Mikey spat, daggers in his eyes. There was something hauntingly desperate about him. Raph made to break away, but his brother was still blocking him—both Leo and Donnie were on their feet and coming closer.

"You act like we're two different people or somethin', Mikey," Raph almost whispered, stamping down his fury.

"You *are* !" Mikey continued, heedlessly, almost out-of-control. "The real Nightwatcher wouldn't let the Foot take some helpless little kid. You—you're just"—

"I'm what?" Raph asked, voice even quieter. "I'm King a' sayin' and doin' things I'll regret. Hope you thought this through before you make my mistakes all over for me."

Michelangelo's face hardened. "Your mistakes? I've always been able to say things that could get under your skin, bro."

Raph sighed, at a loss. "Just… just tell me what ya want me t' do, Mikey."

Leo had had enough, however. "He's not going to, Raphael, because I've already made my decision. You or I will go into Foot headquarters in the armor, disarm as many of the poison-carrying soldiers as possible, and the rest will follow in the ventilation systems. Don will help you rig up the helmet with a transmitter. If Michelangelo wants to be a petulant child, then he can stay here."

Mikey's anger did not abate; Leo's words flared it into life, just as Leo thought they would. "I'm coming with you to save Lizzie, whether you like it or not, dudes. Not her fault Raph didn't think she was worth it to protect like the rest of the city is…"

Donnie scowled and tried to pull Mikey away from a seething, closed-eyed Raphael. "What is *with* you? The angst-ridden teenager shtick is Raph's, remember? You're hardly making sense anymore—I mean, do you want to save Elizabeth or not?"

Mikey snorted. "I'm the one not making sense, here? Master Splinter always taught us to do the right thing and protect people… and you all turned on her the moment things got tough. Even Raph, Mr. Vigilante Hero himself—the guy who NEVER takes orders"—

"Oh yeah, punk?" Raph cut in. "Master Splinter also taught me to protect my brothers—especially my little bro—and that's supposed to be what's most important. Don't pretend like just cuz ya thought Nightwatcher was a hero that he wasn't wrong, too. Cuz I put you all at risk… an' I had to learn that the hard way."

"Yeah?" Mikey muttered, seething himself. "S'always 'bout putting *us* at risk. You're never sorry to almost kill *yourself* ."

"Michelangelo"—Leo said with a warning voice; but Mikey had already stormed away and out of the room. The three older brothers watched him, and all flinched when they heard the bunkroom door slam shut.

Leo looked at Donnie. "Just our luck. Raph finally grows up and Mikey jumps to take his place on the angst coaster." Donatello here grinned; but Raph glared at them both.

"What—the clown face isn't allowed to be pissed off once in a while? Give the little idiot a break. He starts doin' this every day, then maybe he'll fill my boots—but those're *big* boots." He glanced at Donnie. "Helmet's in the trophy closet, bro. There's already a police radio I installed—you should be able t' alter that to our coms." He then went towards the door. "Gotta go get my gear—Leo, gimme a hand, huh?"

Leo smiled and followed. "Of course."

It was a little run-down warehouse several streets from the shop, and Raph had never taken any of them there yet… too ashamed, or perhaps because he wished to put it as far behind him as he could. Or perhaps because of the blood.

From the look of it, Leo judged that Raphael must have stumbled in here at least thirty or forty times trailing bucket loads of crimson in his wake, and many of those times must have been when he was injured. Rivulets of watered-down rust ran off under the warehouse door, away from a hose in the corner, where Raph probably cleaned his gear. Shelves upon shelves of first aid supplies where easily accessible— *if* his brother could get back to the warehouse. *If* he could get on his bike. *If* he could walk away from the scene.

The leather suit lay in a duffle bag; the armor hung from pegs on the wall, the entire complicated apparatus Raphael must have altered and expanded upon in order to fit it over their awkward animal bodies, and his in particular, ribbed with smooth, bulky muscle. Leo couldn't help but stare around the place in wonder. His brother had a

bare cot set up, also stained with blood, and a small supply of granola bars and water. Enough to survive. *Survive* . Is that what his little brother had done in his absence? Not lived, but survived. Traveling out in the world, it seemed natural that the focus of Leo's existence was to subsist, and learn through the experience; but here again he could see his sibling echoing him, following his shadow, staying in step by whatever means he could.

Raph began to unfold the leather suit, and look over the armor appraisingly, but Leo stopped him with a firm, gentle hand.

"I'll wear the armor, Raph. I don't want you to have to do this—especially not with your shell still mending."

Raph smiled. "What, an' give Mikey more ammo? No thanks, bro."

Leo tightened his grip. "Forget him—this is between us."

Raph's eyes twinkled ever so slightly. "Isn't everything?" Leo snapped his hand back quickly, as though he'd been burned. Raph sighed. "We'll have to do a lot of adjusting jus' to make it fit me, Leo. I've lost a lot a' muscle mass since the last time I put this thing on—compliment's a Donnie's experiments an' getting' injured 'n all. Don't know if we could fit in on ya. 'Sides, I gotta lot a respect for the man I got this armor from… seems kinda not right to pass his gear around, ya know?"

Leo sounded very sober. "You're more important to me than a dead man, Raphael."

Raph chuckled. 'Well, glad t' hear that. But a dead man's more important t' me than a little pressure on the shell. So gimme a hand wi' this."

Raphael had himself clad in the leather suit and steel boots with a quickness formed by over a year of habit, his skin and shell covered from jaw to feet, while Leo worked on shortening the straps that would hold the metal shell case and the armor panels in place;

looking up, he could see Raph had been right—the leather was loose around his shoulders and biceps. He felt amazement creep upon him—Raphael was still noticeably bigger than the rest of them. He measured the weight of the armor with his hands—steel, the entire thing, and not for the half-hearted.

"I can see how your muscles got so big. A year and a half with this on your shoulders must've really bulked you up. Must've been a real work-out for the first couple of months."

Raph chuckled again, easily. "Man, you have no idea. First few days I couldn't even move when I woke up… whole body felt like one huge Charlie horse. Went out once every few nights till I could move faster with it… slowed me down pretty bad, an' I'm already th' slowest a' the four of us. That's when I knew I needed the cot there… had to rest for an hour or so sometimes 'fore I could get back to the den. Plus bein' slow meant I took more injuries—got knifed pretty bad a couple a' times, an' I had to stay here for a few days."

Leo half-smiled. "So I take it you're not that surprised Mikey's angry with you? I wondered why you didn't seem to mind it so much."

Raphael laughed. "Oh, I mind. Guy can drive burnin' pokers through my skin wi' the shit he says—makes me crazy, always has. But I been expectin' it… wouldn't accept nothin' less. I'm just surprised how long it took… we were close again bein' injured and wi' Liz around. Her gettin' taken was just the last straw." Then he sighed, amusement utterly evaporated. "He expected me to act like a hero, I guess. Me bein' a hero makes runnin' out on him like I did kinda okay. Maybe now he gets that I'm no hero and never was."

Leo considered him, finishing with one strap and allowing Raphael to come in and help him with the other. "You know, Raph… I went most of our lives letting Mikey act cruel because I thought that by being so innocent and having a good reason it wasn't a problem. Being the baby can't always be fun, after all. And I suppose there's a difference between cruel jokes and trying your hardest to hurt someone in retaliation for something… but it was never okay when your words

were poisonous after you held them in for so long, and it's not okay for Mikey either. I meant it when I said it—if he keeps acting like this, he can stay here."

Raph shook his head. "Sticks an' stones, bro. Years a' takin' his jokes an' fightin' with you've made me pretty tough."

They worked in silence for a few minutes, then went back to the first strap after realizing they were uneven—as they did so, Leo looked up, on a sudden thought.

"Thank you, by the way. For… for not ganging up on me with Mikey out in the alley—and for defending me. It took me by surprise."

Raph chuckled again and met his brother's eyes. "I'd never gang up on ya, Leo—means I'd have to share ya. And I can take you on my own."

Leo sent an appraising look out at the blood spatters and rivulets. "Yes, I can see that," he teased.

Raph grinned. "I'm surprised ya haven't lectured me yet, big brother. Blood doesn't bother ya?"

Leo shrugged, and echoed his brother's words. "It bothers me. But I was expecting it."

"Smart turtle," Raph said with a smile, taping his temple; the gesture made his face melt into a non-expression, and his eyes went slightly far away. Leo knew automatically why, and reached out to gently take his brother's upraised hand.

"She'll be okay, Raph—we'll get her back."

Donnie was puzzling over Raph's jury-rigged police radio when a heavy, metallic footstep made him look up; his jaw dropped. He might have drawn his weapon had Raphael's face not been perched

on top of the bulky, heavily nicked black vigilante armor. Slowly, Donatello removed his goggles, without realizing how far open his mouth hung.

Nonplussed, Raphael strode into the den, eyes flickering; he never thought his home and this way of life would collide so awkwardly. Leo followed him, waiting for Mikey to show up and whatever reaction that would enjoin. Leonardo couldn't lie; seeing it for the second time, the armor still amazed him—even more so getting Raphael into it, the multiple buckles and attachments, the different ways Raph had tried to protect himself. The deep gouges in the armor, so like his brother's shell—the bullet hole crudely pounded out of the shell plating, making it slightly uneven, which had made Leo shudder. It was a story all on its own, told through a body that had lain just around his brother's flesh, a second skin, a deception that could not tell a lie. His brother had been shot, and stabbed, and bludgeoned. He had been trapped, and beaten, and jumped. He had been pained, and alone, and bleeding. All while his brothers slept.

He had already lectured Raph about all of this; simply because the magnamity of it was finally hitting home didn't mean he could just lecture again. Raph knew, and would not do it again. Something in this felt hollow. It was all that could be done, but the need to do more was there, an unresolvedness. It was enough to almost make Leo understand why Mikey felt the need to get revenge by saying hateful things, to give Raph more pain in return for what he'd inflicted. Because the Nightwatcher represented something different to them than it did to Raphael—for Leo, Mikey, and Donnie, it was the ghost of a kind of failure on their part, in one form or another. Something Donnie couldn't fix, something that resulted from Leo's example, something which Mikey's humor could not smooth out. They had spent months trying to scrub the vigilante from their brains and from off their brother's body, and none of them truly knew what the Nightwatcher had meant to Raphael, nor did they care to ask. It was something to be cleaned away, polished, grown out of. But it was a year of their brother's life. A year that they sought to bury, in a casket

of the mind. Yet somehow it seemed to control them, refusing to be ignored and forgotten, a being unto itself.

But it was just… Raph. No monster and no ghost, just their brother in leather, trying, lost, to do some good. It all seemed… somehow anticlimactic.

But Leo had had enough. His brother deserved some compassion—at this point Raphael had been putting up with them all dealing with the Nightwatcher for months, and it was time to stop. It was because Leo had let his own fear best him that Raph now had a cracked shell, and there was no way of knowing the damage Donnie's experiments could have done. If Mikey added to the pool they might lose their brother for good. And as things progressed, Leo had a sinking suspicion that Master Splinter would point out how much worse they were acting than the vigilante who affected all their actions.

Mikey turned around, now standing in the kitchen; a barely perceptible emotion flitted across his face when he saw the Nightwatcher armor so close, and Raphael's piercing eyes watching him. Leo glared, daring Mikey to start another tirade, before Raph strode over to Donnie.

"Radio workin' out for ya? Sorry it's such a jury-rigged disaster… I sorta played it by ear. Nothin' you'd whip up, even in your sleep."

Donatello swallowed his shock and chuckled. "Yeah… yeah, it's uh… it's actually very functional. Just a little strange. Not sure where you found some of these components. And I'm having some trouble locating the power source."

"Same one's the lights," Raph responded, then looked at Donnie's computer, which seemed to be working through dozens and dozens of the sheets Lizzie had drawn. "Any luck?"

Donnie sighed. "It's been trying configuration after configuration, and nothing lines up completely. It's some intricate mathematical drawing

—a computer model. I'm trying algorithms of the equations she wrote to make sense of it." He finished tweaking the helmet with a satisfied sigh. "There. I've installed a camera like the one in Mikey's Carl head, so I have direct linkage to whatever you see—just in case. You'll hear my voice just as you would the radio—the controls are all the same, we're just on a secure channel."

Raph took the helmet, looking it over. "Seems kinda ironic, doesn't it?"

But Donnie was gazing at Mikey; he was looking at the back of a marshmallow package studiously, seeing nothing, and listening to everything.

"Hey, Mikey… you know, this is your big chance. You can really see the armor and everything—closest you've ever been, isn't it?"

Raph scowled. "Aw, Donnie, c'mon… he finally gave it a break…."

Mikey looked slightly abashed; it was plain he was fighting between the desire to be near his hero's gear and see it up close for the first time, confirming it's reality, and being furious with the disappointing person who wore it.

Leo folded his arms. "Michelangelo… you can't blame people when they fall off unrealistic pedestals… especially if what they did was mature and saved your life."

Raph shrugged. "You can come see it, Mikey… it's nothin' special, never was. The real person who was special's the one who gave it to me… this is just… some bashed up metal and leather n' stuff."

Mikey locked eyes with him at last. "That's not true, dude… there's a buncha people who think it's special. You never even met 'em… but they probably keep wishin' he'll come back."

"Yeah, well… he's not," Raphael responded, simply. But Mikey came forward, and Raph lightly handed the helmet over to his brother.

Mikey sat on the arm of the couch, tracing the line of the front ridge and the numerous gashes in the thick metal with a finger, seeing himself reflected in the dark glass of the visor; the face of justice to some, a demon to others. His hero, who had stolen away his brother. The others watched him, apprehensively.

"Hey, Raph? What's my favorite ice cream?"

Raphael frowned deeply, blinking several times, too shocked not to answer. "Uh—rocky road, an' ya always pick out all the damn marshmallows, too."

Mikey continued tracing the helmet's edges. "Batman or Superman?"

Raphael chuckled. "Dumb question—Batman, duh."

Mikey almost smiled at that. "My favorite movie?"

Raph rolled his eyes. " *Godzilla* —what the hell's this all about now, ya nutjob?"

"I don't know any of that stuff about you."

Raphael blinked several more times. "You—you what? What the"—he stomped forward, and smacked his brother lightly over the head, making Mikey look up sharply. Raph made a rather impressive sight, standing with arms crossed in full leather and black, battle-scarred armor. "First of all, none a' that shit's important, ya got me? And second of all—why the hell would I notice ya ate all the marshmallows if rocky road wasn't my favorite too, huh? And if you don't know I'll take Batman over Superman when I ran around New York in *this* getup for eighteen months, you're a moron. Lastly, ya don't know my favorite movie cuz I watch it with Casey. What, you think ya don't know me or somethin' jus' cuz I was Nightwatcher? That's just… I don't know, Mikey. It's too much, even from you. Maybe you should watch somethin' other than TV more often if ya feel like you don't know me."

Shocked and gripping the helmet, Mikey stood up, as Raph paced a bit. "You're the one who's always… gone off and, like, doin' your own stupid thing, and never talks about it… I mean, here you are livin' with me and I still don't know much more about the Nightwatcher than what I heard on TV… an' you've always been like that… you 'n Leo both. I don't know where Leo went or what he did or…"

Raph sighed. "Not everybody's like you, Mikey… Leo an' I aren't really the type to go around tellin' people what we like and what we do…" He gazed around, searching. "Okay… what's the first bone I broke and who did it?"

Mikey shrugged. "Femur. Leo. Kick practice."

"What sound drives me the craziest, other than your voice?"

Mikey actually smiled at that. "Whistling. You just hate happiness in the world, especially at seven AM."

"Damn straight. Only acceptable motorcycle engine?"

Mikey chuckled. "V-twin or bust. On a Harley, in a perfect universe."

"Good," Raph said, as though he were proctoring an oral examination. "Now stop bein' a moron. You're my goddamn brother… the last thing ya gotta worry 'bout is not knowin' me… even if I'm not always the type to jus'… out and out say things. That's just who I am, I guess. An' there's stuff I'll outgrow, Mikey, but I ain't gonna ever really change, so… I guess you'll have to accept it at some point, man."

But Mikey was gazing again at the helmet, looking hard at the visor, and a dark spot that looked like deep crimson; he examined it—then, very quickly, turned the helmet over and looked inside.

"There's… there's blood inside," he said, blankly.

"Nightwatchers bleed too, Mikey," Leo said, gently.

But Mikey swallowed hard, and shoved the helmet back into his brother's hands—Raphael reached out, however, gripping his arm to stop him, and they matched gazes once again.

"Mikey—I was alone for a long time out there. And I really don't wanna be anymore."

Michelangelo wrenched his arm away. "You're not, dude—you've got Leo back again, doncha?" There was an edge to his words—as always, he was capable or worming his way under his brother's skin.

Leo and Raph straightened up, with twin looks of surprise, as Mikey backed away and went back to the kitchen, giving them a final, burning blue glare.

There was a sudden crash, and Donnie was backing hurriedly away from his fallen chair, out of his alcove, staring with stunned, frightened eyes at his many flickering monitors, and his brothers rushed towards him, holding his arms and turning their eyes on those many variegated screens. They gave a collective gasp.

The computer had finally cracked the code, and put all the drawings together—they were staring at a giant model of the Shredder, genetically remastered, restored, and regenerated.

The only voice capable was Raphael's, and he had one word that could get past their utter dismayed astonishment.

"Liz…"

Interlude: The End of Words

Author's Note: This and the next interlude (following the last two interludes right where they left off) were supposed to be one chapter, but that proved rather large… so they shall be two instead. The next normal chap will be written and posted soon… I know I left you all with a cliffhanger. Thankfully there will be some good Mikey action in these interludes as well. Enjoy!

Raphael went home and went straight to bed, without looking at anyone; he was wrong if he thought no one was looking at him. While Mikey and Master Splinter worked on dinner preparations, Donatello was putting a VCR back together, though he hadn't been at it for long. He watched his younger brother closely as he strode by, then waited for Leonardo's appearance, which came a good while afterwards. Leo looked around, as if for Raphael, then sighed, and went towards the dojo. He did not make it that far.

"Leonardo," Master Splinter halted him, "Raphael seems to have slipped into a difficult mood—would you tell him to come down for dinner?"

From the look on Leo's face, it was the last thing he wanted to hear right then, and so Donnie stood up.

"I'll tell him, Master Splinter."

Splinter looked on his bright second oldest with gentler eyes. "Raphael can be hard to handle sometimes, Donatello—you are positive?"

Donnie smiled, but directed his next comment at Leo. "He's my little brother too, you know."

He could feel Leo glaring as he strode towards the bunkroom. Donnie knew he would probably pay for it the next day in practice,

but he somehow didn't feel fazed.

The bunkroom was dark; Raphael hadn't made it to his own bunk, and was huddled on top of the blankets in Leo's, facing the wall. He was still, and not breathing evenly enough to be asleep.

"Not hungry?" Donnie asked, a little too knowingly.

Raph looked at him. "Donnie?" Back to the wall. "Yeah. Not hungry."

"You're gonna worry Master Splinter if you don't eat. Would you get sick if you forced yourself right now?"

It was an odd question, and Raph was silent for a moment.

"Why do you think that?"

Donnie took a breath, and sat on Leo's bunk, looking at his brother's shell. "You and Leo got in a fight."

Raphael had never turned around so quickly in his life—his eyes were ablaze. Donnie held up a hand.

"Easy—I wasn't eavesdropping—I couldn't hear what you were fighting about, I just heard shouting. It… it sounded bad."

Raph's head hit the pillow again; he continued looking at the wall, though he was no longer facing it.

"Bad. Bad is an understatement. I'm not hungry." His voice sounded hollow, and simple. His defenses were down—he would have let Donnie sit there, just to have his presence, until he felt a light brush on his arm.

The reaction was so sudden it took both of them by surprise—after half a second Donatello was pinned to the floor, his little brother above him, Raph's face teetering on the edge of madness, pupils squeezed tight even in the dark room, breathing hard, with a fist pulled back as to hit him. They wavered there for a minute.

"Raphi—what's wrong?" Donnie asked, frightened, sure he must have touched a nasty bruise or cut without thinking. "Did you get injured or something?"

Raphael's eyes slowly flickered back to sanity; his breathing slowed, and he lowered his fist, taken aback and confused.

"It… it's Raph. And I'm not hungry."

Donatello left the bunkroom, more disturbed by his strange younger brother than usual—normally Leo dealt with him, and for good reason: Leo knew how. He went towards the dojo.

Leonardo had always been a diligent, studious martial arts devotee, but what Donnie found upon entering the practice room—what he would always find after that day—unsettled him. Perfect kata, a driven, almost manic focus in Leo's eyes—the same movements, doggedly, over and over and over, never different, never changing, deaf to the world. Donnie had to shout to get his attention.

" *What* , Donnie?" Leo asked, as though he hadn't just been ignoring his sibling for several minutes.

"You coming to dinner?"

Leo frowned. "I'm not hungry."

Donnie didn't allow himself to flinch at his brothers' odd behavior. "There's something wrong with Raph. More than usual, I mean."

Leo's gaze was cold. "Oh? And what's usually wrong with him?"

Donatello crossed his arms. "Other than the fact that he never talks? He goes off by himself, and broods, and the only people he speaks to are Master Splinter once in a while and *you* . And now he won't even eat, and he just"—Donnie stopped, because Leo's expression hadn't altered.

"There's nothing *wrong* with Raph, and there never was," Leo denied, his voice strained. "Don't worry—I'll deal with him."

"But"—

"He's *my* job! *My* responsibility!" Leo countered, his voice louder. He visibly got control of himself. "I'm sorry, Don… I just had a rough time of it… But leave him to me." He turned back to his katas.

Donatello blinked. "So—he's mad at you for something? You two can be so juvenile sometimes. You always were good at keeping your stupid secrets."

Leo whirled, but his brother was gone. He went back to training, and felt his mind drain of emotion—driving the fire out of himself, purifying the pit of his stomach, cleansing his muscles, working the violence out of his system. To be an empty vessel. To start over.

The next day's training was an unprecedented nightmare. Raph was up and in the dojo before Leo could wake him, avoiding breakfast staunchly; so Leo pulled Mikey and Donnie reluctantly from slumber at the appropriate hour, tried unsuccessfully to get Raphael to acknowledge his presence long enough to instruct him to eat something, gave up, and started warm-ups. Raph did these, almost as though he were not part of the group—from memory, looking glassy-eyed straight ahead, while Mikey passed alarmed looks at Donnie, who shrugged, and Leonardo stared at his brother almost pleadingly. Raphael's behavior would attract Splinter's notice, even if neither of them said a word.

They went through kata next under Leo's eye; Raph's form was far better than normal, as though he were paying closer attention just so Leo wouldn't have to give him notice. He only had to instruct him—from afar—to remember to keep his elbow up, which he did, silently. If Donnie and Mikey didn't think anything very out of the ordinary was happening before, they certainly did now. Leo split them up into sparring groups, pairing Raph with Mikey and Donatello with himself,

hoping Raph would get more energetic in response to his jumpy little brother. It was a bad call.

Raphael normally threw the first punch in sparring, brave and enthusiastic, and Mikey was the same way, so normally when they sparred it seemed they got along better than usual. Michelangelo seemed to love being paired against his headstrong sibling and treated it like a game, and Raph responded well to his brother's excitement—they could both exhibit a lot of energy in matches, and showed the many outcomes of speed against strength, depending on the day. But on this particular morning, Raphael did not attack. And Mikey, in short order, got bored quickly coming at his brother and getting turned away repeatedly by defensive wooden sai.

"Leo! Raphi's not playing!" Mikey complained, earning a scowl from Raph. Leo, who had his hands full parrying Donatello's bo and still managing to watch the other sparring match, responded pragmatically.

"If he's working on defensive strategies then you work on offense, Mikey. Go with the flow."

Mikey didn't appear to like this answer; sparring was one place where Raph was never apathetic, and never quiet. It was a time Michelangelo normally got to have fun with his brother, who spent the rest of the time out with Leo, out by himself, or being a cynical wallflower. He went at Raphael again with his *nunchaku* , turned away deftly; so, smiling, Mikey moved in and shoved Raph playfully. He received for his efforts the reward of a slightly heated look.

"Don't, Mikey," Raph warned. "I'm not in the mood."

Michelangelo had put away his weapons, grinning. Now they were getting somewhere. "Don't what? Do this?" He jumped nimbly, and shoved Raph from the side—then leapt away again under his brother's answering swipe of the arm.

"Knock it *off* , Mikey!"

Their youngest brother was a bundle of energy by now, bouncing and poking Raph's arms, ducking the unfocused punches Raph responded with; he had put his sai away by now as well. Mikey tried for another poke, but stopped just an inch shy, with a wider grin.

"Ha ha, I'm not touching you!"

This earned him a punch in the face, sending Mikey sprawling.

"Ow! Leo! I didn't touch him, it's not fair!"

Leo sighed, and signaled a time-out to Donnie, who was watching their brothers as well.

"Mikey, sparring isn't a game. And you deserved it," Leonardo reprimanded, marching forward. "Switch off. Donnie, spar with Mikey and help him work some of that energy off before Master Splinter comes for today's lesson. Raph, with me. You're gonna have to do something about that sunny disposition in the next twenty minutes." He'd meant it lightly, and gently took Raph's arm to lead him away, but his brother yanked back and followed of his own accord. Leo would have given him a strange look but studiously kept his eyes averted. Acting normal and ordering Raphael around was proving harder and harder. When they were on the other side of the training room, he pulled Raph closer, ignoring his glares.

"I know you're mad at me, and no apology will work—but let's have this out before Master Splinter gets here, or we… I mean, do you really want him to find out?"

Raphael's head was turned away, opaque and somehow uncaring, but his answer was clear. "No. You don't deserve that."

It was a cryptic answer, because Leo wasn't sure what it was he didn't deserve—the punishment, whatever it would be, or the look on their father's face, or the shame, or the blessed release of telling the secret and lightening the burden on his shoulders, to hell with the consequences.

Raph seemed to hear his thoughts—his next words appeared to take a lot of effort. "I said everything I did because I didn't want you to get in trouble. I didn't mean to hurt you."

This stung Leonardo more than anything ever could—Raphael thought himself the one at fault; the situation was awkward at best, and it seemed the best way his brother could handle it and still behave as normally as possible was by shouldering the blame, at least in his own mind. An icy claw gripped Leo's heart. He could feel himself breaking under the strain; he could only imagine the force of the contradictions Raph's brain was attempting to hold onto all at once.

"It wasn't your fault."

Raph's eyes managed to meet his; they burned with smoldering self-hatred.

"Then why did I like it?"

Leo wished fervently he had an answer for that… he was big brother, after all. He should have an answer. He should be able to tell his little brother why they had both liked it, and why it was supposed to be shocking and horrible. There had never been anything the four of them had liked that had not been good, or at worst a mixture of mostly good and a little bad, like pizza. To find something shocking and horrible to be, in actuality, *wonderful* for over a year must mean there was something wrong with them both. And yet, somehow, as Raphael confessed he'd liked it, Leo felt a small, dark satisfaction down where the fire had been burning so fervently, fighting with a galling sickness at the confused and strained look on his brother's face.

A week earlier, Leo would have grasped his brother's arm tightly and they would have commenced for some friendly sparring; he could not do that any longer. A barrier came up between them, an interwoven cloth separating skin from skin, solidified and very real, with the aura of permanence. A week earlier, he could jokingly challenge Raph and

it wouldn't feel like an order, and Raphael would follow along, boundless energy and strength. A weak earlier, they would exchange secret smiles that communicated more than any language. But no more. He had reduced his brother to an angry ghost of what he had been before. Leo suspected that he himself was little better.

But Raph could still echo him, as far away as he seemed. "There's something wrong with me…"

"With us…" Leo corrected. "Both of us."

Raph's eyes grew wide, the force of a battling contradiction pounding against the barrier. Gazing around wildly, he drew his sai. "We're… we're supposed to be sparring," he muttered, sounding lost. Leo drew his swords, staving off pity. He would hate himself for pitying his brother, his once-partner, that illusory equal only he could see. He felt like he was sewing a shadow onto his feet, when it strained to fly away, helplessly his silhouette no matter where it went, vanishing in the light. He ran at Raphael; the clocking of bokken on wooden sai, struck hollowly, like a Buddhist chime, rang through the room. Donnie and Mikey were watching, unseen, as Leo took the offensive. Raphael stood like a stone, small, lanky and muscular, with shifting, troubled eyes. Something stirred, something not unfamiliar, though seen perhaps only twice before.

Leo landed a split kick, disarming his brother, but Raph had a hold of one ankle, and, bokken flying, they rolled across the tatami mats, trying to get each other into a headlock. The lost look left Raph's eyes for a moment, his energy returning as he tried to gain the upper-hand with the shade of his former defiant smile. After quite a few unsuccessful attempts, they both lay flat on their backs, taking a few short gasps of air before leaping at each other again. Donatello watched them, confused and discerning, while Mikey gazed on with the smallest of frowns. Wondering why he wasn't good enough, in an unfortunate nook within himself.

It was truly amazing, how easily the muscles remembered joy, and strove to return to it; the way adrenalin and play wrestling forced the

tendons of Raphael's face closer and closer towards a smile, toward looking like the person he had been the day before—before—

Then a brush, completely accidental as both of them strode to get the upper-hand, below his arm, where Leo used to tickle him, and Raphael's pupils squeezed to pinpricks in an instant.

Leonardo blinked, a searing pain ripping through his skull and a burning sensation over the backs of his legs… he squinted, fighting off a wave of nausea and dizziness, realizing he was suddenly looking up at the pipes on the ceiling, several feet away from where he was before—he heard a shout, and instantaneously his sight filled with his brother's face.

Raphael was unrecognizable from the boy he had been a second earlier; he breathed in seering gasps, half wheeze and half animalistic whines, his pupils so small they had vanished, his amber eyes empty but bright in the fire glow illuminating the practice room, orbs of dark honey glinting gold metallic flashes. With a flash of understanding Leo saw his brother's face, beyond control or rational thought, feeling, panicking, sickened… before he felt Raph's fist connect with his face again, and that choked sobbing gasp, mixed with his own groan of pain. His brother's primal anger burned.

Then their eyes connected again, and Raphael's seemed to snap back, with a strange click, a jolt of the head, gazing around, confused… then realizing… then horrified. Leo blinked again, seeing Splinter standing above them, a hand on Raphael's shoulder, and a terrifying worried spark in his old eyes; and there were Donnie and Mikey, who had probably called him while the world was reeling around their brothers, both with matching looks of fear.

Raphael stumbled backward, away from his father's grasp, away from his stunned brothers, away from Leo's understanding, bruised face. Raph was dripping cold sweat, and shivering, as his body cooled too fast and too suddenly, shock creeping up on his flesh and his mind.

"My son…" Splinter reached out to him, as Don and Mikey heaved a reeling Leo to his feet; no one had ever hit him so hard in his life. Raph was still backing away, while their Father steadily, slowly, pursued, with his gentle voice. "Do not let your fear cut you off from us… You need your father and your brothers now. Come and be with us. Do not run away…"

Leo swallowed; so easy to grab Raph and sit him down with them, but he was so fully capable of leaving them mentally—always, their brother could slip away and not be a part of what he didn't wish to be. He was someone who was not accustomed to being forced. But Raphael was now gazing at his hands, as his digits trembled.

"I can't…. I can't…."

Gentler, now. "Can't what, my son?"

Raph's eyes were on Leo again, straining, cracked glass, against the force of a heavy contradiction. "The… the same…."

Then Raphael was running, to be fiercely sick outside the den, throwing up black and yellow bile, as they were the only contents of his stomach, and Donnie was holding Leo back from following him at a look from their Father, who then checked over Leo's bruises, a deeply troubled look in his eye.

"Is… is he crazy?" Donnie asked, more to himself than anybody else. "Will he always be sick like this?"

Mikey started forward, but Splinter caught him. "Now is not the time, Michelangelo… I don't believe he would hurt you, but perhaps jokes can wait for another time."

Mikey did not look up, gazing at the door fixedly. "But I wanna see him."

Donnie had compassionate eyes. "You don't want to see him like this, Mikey… trust me."

Mikey blinked; his amazing, mysterious older brother, never afraid, the brother who got rid of spiders for him, who matter-of-factly kicked away predators, the headstrong fighter with his defiant eyes, not even scared of Leo… But he saw for a moment, that same brother gripping a box with a rotting pigeon, that same brother making his own hand bleed without even knowing it, that same brother looking up into the world at crows taking flight, light reflecting in his eyes, and gaining Leo's secret admiring looks… daring, reckless, immortal toss of the head and deep fire. How to reconcile that with the moments of a strange insanity, the removal into a bizarre grief for something none of them could identify, something perhaps none of them knew.

Michelangelo turned on Leo. "What'd you do to him?"

Leo opened his mouth, but Donnie cut in. "Leo didn't do anything—Raphael went berserker in battle. Probably too much adrenaline… I suppose it makes sense."

Master Splinter too had his eyes on Leonardo, however, calmly and piercingly.

"Perhaps our Raphael felt somehow trapped, my son?"

Leo's eyes were flickering, still trying to spit out the blood seeping into his mouth. Mikey glared for a moment, then marched out, ignoring Donnie's preventative hands.

"You guys and your dumb secrets," Mikey said, sharply. "So you can hurt each other all ya want without havin' to tell anybody. It's stupid."

"Michelangelo…" their father said, quietly, but Mikey was out of the dojo.

Raphael had made it to the bathroom by this time, and had his head under the cold-water tap, scrubbing his mouth and hands obsessively; he continued to tremble, and icy sweat was still pouring

down the backs of his arms and legs. Mikey leaned against the doorway.

"Man… even bears got nothin' on you, Raphi. Guess we'll havta keep ya in a cage and prod ya with electric thingies from now on."

Raph tried to glare, but his stomach heaved again; he gagged dryly, having absolutely nothing to give anymore.

"What d'you… want… Mikey?" he gasped, still nauseous. "Go back an' cower with Donnie or somethin'… know you're all scared of me by now."

Mikey came into the bathroom, unfazed, and sat on the counter, throwing a towel at his brother. "Hey, Raphi—you like Batman or Superman?"

Raph blinked, trying his hardest to compose himself. "Dunno… don't read comic books, Mikey."

"You'd probably like Batman… more, uh… realism-istic, I guess."

Raph looked over the towel he was using to dry his somewhat pale face. "Realistic?"

Mikey kicked his feet. "Yeah. You're a stick-in-the-mud—don't like imaginary stuff, right? So weird. You'll be a funny old guy one day, Raphi."

Raph's face hardened a bit, determined. "Not gonna get old, Mikey."

Mikey laughed. "Huh? Everybody gets old. Even Batman. Looks kinda fun, too. We'll play chess and chase down whipper-snappers and bore people with stories an' be all creepy 'n stuff…"

"Yeah, well, I won't."

Mikey pouted. "But me 'n Donnie 'n Leo are."

"Good for you," Raph grumbled. "But I can't get old and weak."

Mikey blinked, confused. "But…"

"I don't wanna get… useless." Raphael stopped, staring past Mikey at the door; Leo stood watching them in the shadows outside.

"What d' *you* want?" Mikey grouched, slipping off the counter; he could feel Raph's glare, but ignored it, smugly.

Leo folded his arms. "Nice attitude, Michelangelo—keep it up, see what happens. Raph—can we talk? Please?"

Mikey turned his head to Raph, waiting for him to send Leo off for whatever their oldest brother had done to make him so weird, but Raph's eyes seemed to flicker away, looking everywhere but at his siblings.

"Um… whatever. I guess."

Leo walked in solemnly and stared pointedly at Mikey until, getting the hint, the youngest sidled out, still watching Raph; he did not receive eye contact until Leo quietly closed the door in his face—all he glimpsed before staring at dark wood was a look, saying clearly and disturbingly, *I'm afraid.*

So Mikey stood where he was, and listened intently, doubting his brothers thought he would stay. Usually he would have blinked at the door for a moment and then wandered off to watch TV or play on his skateboard. But Raphael was never scared.

Leo leaned his shell against the door for a long moment, gazing at his little brother intently, with an appraising eye.

"You… um…" A deep breath. "You feeling okay?"

Raph was trying not to audibly gasp back the waves of nausea washing over him, knowing his stomach had nothing left he could

scrape off its walls, and dreading the dry gags that made his insides feel like a hollow, stilted desert. He didn't answer directly.

"Your head okay?"

Leo lifted himself deftly away from the door, his face still pounding with heat and pain. "It's nothing I won't get over after an hour or so, little bro. But we have to talk about this at some point… I can't let you just get out of control like that. What if it wasn't me? What if it was Donnie, or Mikey, or even some random human or something? You had… it was like you had no idea you were doing it. Like someone else was forcing you… like a puppet, you know? It was scary." Another deep breath. "And it wasn't the first time, really. We both know that."

Mikey frowned, then gleaned on it—Freddy the pigeon, Raph's arms desperately holding a box and grasping dead things. That frightened look, and the single, haunting repetition: " *I can't* ." It seemed an extreme, one-time only deal then, but they had witnessed it now once again. They knew the temper and rage Raph was capable of, and this could be just the next step, one that Raph could reach without ever showing anger in the first place. No warning. Joking, the ghost of a smile, before the slam, sudden and deathly abrupt, like a car accident.

Raph kept his eyes on the wall behind his brother. "Really? And what is *o-nii-san* planning to do about his crazy little brother?" His voice should have been challenging, sarcastic, biting to match the words; instead he sounded empty, apathetic, monotone.

Leo maintained his perfect calm; he moved further in, and reached out, placing a hand on either of Raphael's arms, and gripping them gently but firmly, forcing their eye contact, and ignoring his sibling's flinches and attempts to back away. "Don't, Raph. Show me you can do this. I'm not… I never was… out to hurt you."

Raphael's eyes had already gained that opaque, faraway steel look, disassociating him from his body. Leo gave his face a small slap,

crisp and cool, and his brother's eyes returned, on fire.

"That's better. You have to listen to me on this, Raph. Master Splinter is starting to really think there's a screw loose, and I *don't want that for you* . You're tougher than this. I'm not asking you to do it for me—just for yourself. And for the others. Hate me forever if you want, but don't take it out on them… especially when you were concerned about how fair it was to Mikey and Donnie all along."

Raphael remained silent, and Leo shook him very slightly. "Answer me. D'you want to be like this? D'you want something else controlling you—to *let* something else control you? Master Splinter calls you the strong one. There's a reason, Raphael…"

"Stop," Raph said, very low and sudden. Something boiled and seethed under his voice. "I havta get outta here…"

But Leo prevented him, placing his shell in front of the door and holding his brother at arm's length. "What, you think I'd tell you this for myself? You don't think I wish I could be…" here he whispered, so low he almost couldn't hear himself. "…like you?"

"You wish you were sick and weak and crazy all the time?" Raph asked, with renewed fire.

Leo whispered in his ear, and Raph, frowning, couldn't push him away. "I… I wish… I wish I had the courage to be sick when something sickened me. I wish I could be weak when there was something worth being weak for, and be willing to show it. And you're the only thing I've ever been crazy about. You see a sick animal and pick it up, even if Mikey makes fun of you or Donnie says it has germs or Master Splinter is afraid you can't handle it dying. You took care of them anyways. You… you give everything a fair shot. Even me." He drew away, and matched eyes again; Raph did not flicker away this time. Leo spoke in a normal voice. "I know I can't dig you out of this. But I also know you're strong enough to do it—I just hope you remember the reasons to dig."

Mikey now had his ear pressed against the door intently, puzzling at the sudden silences and hoping they would at least hint at what actually happened; he might make fun of them for it, but it wasn't like he would tell. But that was Leo and Raph—they kept their secrets without ever having to say what they were.

"Leo," Raph's voice was stronger and clearer now, "I really don't wanna talk about this anymore. Especially not… y'know, here." He tried to push past this time, but Leo cut him off half-way, still holding his arms; Raph looked around with doubt, afraid of using his strength and turning back into what he'd been in the training room—afraid of himself.

"Better you hear it from me than Master Splinter, because I understand—I know what happened. Just… be better than what I did to you. You're amazing, Raphi… you're stronger than me, in a lot of ways. I know you can do it."

Leonardo was young; he did not know that what he was asking wasn't as easy as it seemed, and wouldn't happen within days or weeks. But he had a lifetime to deal with his brother. They had hurt each other; yet somehow, it had pushed them closer together, knocking mental elbows—every action and thought somehow included the other—if either of them knew how swiftly such closeness while aware of the inequities between them would turn to loving loathing, they might have struggled earlier to push away.

"Don't lie, Leo. I'm not strong… that's why you havta carry me and cover for me all the time. I'm the weak link." Raphael's voice revealed something raw down within, which he had exposed slightly to Michelangelo—something chafing under the madness he had just given himself up to, that had conquered him so utterly. All because of a touch. "But… but I… I don't wanna be like this. I promise I'll figure it out. Eventually." His voice turned bitter. "I know the price if I fail…"

Leo frowned deeply, and shook Raph sternly one more time. "I didn't mean what I did as a punishment, Raphael," he hissed.

"Then what the hell did you mean it as?" Raph hissed back, low and quick.

Leo's eyes burned—not unlike his brother's. "Just the truth."

A long silence, fighting past each other's opaqueness, towards glimmerings of actual feeling, the undercurrents of guilt and desire and repulsion and affection weaving virulent paths through their minds. Then Raphael quirked a small, almost unnoticeable half-smile.

"Nice to know we're both sick." It was a whisper, but something about it lit a tiny flame of joy in Leo, telling him deep down that his brother believed they were still equals, regardless of the harsh realities of their life and those inflicted upon each other. That very sense of false—possibly false—equality that should repel him, as it had made possible everything they had done in the last year, but which Leo held, regardless, like a small treasure. Slowly, retaining that hard-won eye contact, he placed his hands, palm-first, below Raph's arms, where he used to tickle him, and held them there. Raph closed his eyes once, but didn't flinch or back away.

Leo sickened himself, but didn't dare show it; every nerve and muscle ached, straining to bring him forward into that embrace once more. How many times must terrible things happen before his body learned not to want it? So he would train it away, burn the memory of sensations and transcendence out of his mind and off his skin, roast it off his dendrites and axons with hot pokers of diligence and meditation. He would turn to his spirit for guidance. He would be a being of light, above this base affection with his little brother.

He wasn't sure, but a small flicker told him that Raphael saw the struggle on his face, and leaned forward to kiss his brother's cheek, an unspoken promise. So were born, polarized, the leader and the protector, the head and the right hand, out of an unfinished touch and the dream for a someday, when what they had done would become okay.

Then Raph pushed past Leo and nearly threw himself out the door, stopping abruptly to see Mikey, and gaze at him steadily, daringly. Mikey, who had barely backed his frowning face and confused eyes away in time, watched back in puzzlement—then moved to follow. He stuck by his walking older brother in silence, suddenly aware that Raph wasn't telling him to go away.

"Um…" Mikey said at length; he paused, received no discouragement, and so continued. "Wanna borrow the first issue of *Batman* ?"

Raph swallowed, and nodded. He was fighting tears, but for the first time, Mikey didn't say anything about it.

Interlude: Starting Over

Author's Note: Here we are--part two to the last interlude. For all of you wondering "What the fuck is Splinter thinking?" this is the chapter for you. You will later see why I had to write it as the normal story progresses. All that aside, I wanted to say thanks for the phenomenal responses, especially to the incest chapters... I was sweating bullets there for awhile . Please enjoy!

Leo got up early to meditate with Master Splinter, as he did every morning; upon looking up, he discovered Raphael was not in bed, and a cold terror sunk like a stone to the bottom of his stomach. He hurried to their father's room, and froze on the threshold. It did not take a practiced eye to see Raph hadn't slept a wink all night; he was now kneeling before their sensei's low table, looking into a cup of tea with a rather nauseous look on his face. Master Splinter gazed up, seeing his eldest in the doorway.

"Come in, Leonardo. Close the door behind you, please."

Leo did as he was told; when he had made it to the center of the tatami mats, the old rat gestured to him to stop, then nodded at Raph.

"Raphael. Your *o-nii-san* is here."

Raph's back was to his brother; at this, he spun on his knees slowly and bowed, as they'd always been taught how, though they only ever stood on such ceremony in the dojo. The dread took a firmer, heavier hold on Leo, as he nodded to his sibling and knelt next to him, across from their father, who looked between them with his shrewd, gentle and firm eyes.

"I sense something deadly hanging between you, my sons, and it is not the first time. I have received no answers from Raphael, but there is a loyalty between brothers that sometimes even a father

cannot break. However, Leonardo, now that you are here I shall remind you that you have a responsibility to your brother's well-being. If there is something I should know, now is the time to say it."

When Raph had come out of his bow, before turning back around to face their sensei, his eyes had connected with Leo's for but a moment. They challenged him, indefinitely, warning him to be strong. To keep their secret. Leo had marveled at it, paying careful attention to his own impassive facial expression, lest Splinter know what had passed between them in that millisecond. Then Raphael's eyes fell away, blank and opaque again. He had probably been here for hours, finding ways of not answering their father's questions. Protecting his brother.

Raphael had said, forebodingly, that no one would take his word over Leo's, but nobody did more to fulfill that belief than Raph himself. He didn't even try to see if he was wrong. He protected Leo without telling a soul in their small world his thoughts on the matter, as dark and unfathomable as ever. Leo would never hear another word about it beyond what Raph had said the previous day, in their whispered conversations.

Leonardo looked into their father's old, furry face, their first face, with those bright, watchful eyes. Human voices echoed in his head— *bad, shocking, separate* . He took a breath, and opened his mouth.

"There's… nothing to tell, sensei."

Silence; then, something strained in Splinter's voice. "I am not speaking as your teacher, Leonardo. What has happened to my brave and daring sons with their treasure hunting, who never tire of each other's company? What has happened to hurt the bond you have fought to maintain since you were infants? I feel I have been robbed of two children and given angry ghosts in their place."

Leo swallowed, and spoke softly. "We came to a conclusion, father. It's entirely between us."

Master Splinter blinked several times, not letting on what he may have gleaned from this answer. "And what conclusion is that, my sons?"

Raphael remained staring into his tea with more or less empty brown eyes. "Leo is *o-nii-san* ."

Their father actually looked surprised. "Raphael… my son, you have known this all your life."

Raph remained quiet for a moment, making his father and brother think he had stubbornly slipped away from them, before he answered. "In my head."

Splinter's expression softened, his ears flattening a bit. He came out from behind the table and placed his weathered digits gently on the brow of his second youngest. "The world is cruel to the innocent, Raphael… and yet the innocent find the world wonderful. I wish I could protect your heart, but that is the impossible dream of all parents. I fear for you. I fear the darkness and pain that awaits you where you are drawn most, making of you a hollow shell who does not remember why he lives."

Raph was gazing into his half-full cup of vegetal green tea, tracing trails of steam like smoke and water; Leo could tell, however, how intently his brother was listening, and detect the strains of pain lingering in his eyes. There lay the impossibility of it around them, the invisible glass house in which they lived, and Raphael, lingering in doorways.

"Go and wake your brothers, Raphael," Splinter said, returning to his place. "Make sure Michelangelo eats something for breakfast. Leonardo will join you shortly."

Raph nodded, and stood—a few steps away, he paused, looking back and frowning.

"Master Splinter?" His voice was tentative but ridged with strength. "It… it was nobody's fault."

The old rat stood slowly, a hand slightly outstretched, bemused and troubled. "What was nobody's fault, Raphael?"

Raph shrugged. "The way I am."

It hung between the three of them as Raphael strode silently out, an unfinished sentence, a thought not followed through. Crazy, simple. Walking the edge between worlds. A voice laced with self-loathing and acceptance of an unreality that held such startling truth. Then Raphael was gone, and Leo and Splinter were alone. Leo had a hand over his eyes, but upon feeling its full wrath, could not resist looking up into his father's steady, penetrating gaze.

"You have lost something very precious to you, Leonardo. I can see the horror of it in your eyes."

Leo opened his mouth but found himself incapable of making sound, struck dumb, air stolen from his lungs; when he blinked, his brother's half-mad berserker face held him. Horror. He could not make this go away.

"I do not know how, Leonardo, but the *what* is plain to me. Things will not be the same in our home, and we must accept that. All we have is each other… someday you and your brother will find your way out of this darkness, and find each other once again. I can only help you do that so much, if I am not aware of the events that took place." Splinter's voice rang with a kind of doom, finality, but urged him to move forward.

Leo nodded, and swallowed hard. Jasmine and bancha tea, still powerless to settle his nerves. "Father… What do you think he meant?"

Splinter took a deep breath before continuing; for the first time in his life, Leo reflected on how old his father suddenly seemed. "You were

born to lead the strong, Leonardo, while Raphael was born to protect the weak. But the very strength that makes a protector of him comes from gentleness and empathy, two blessings that I fear do not hold up well under the life we lead. It is this life that creates a contradiction within him, and it is breaking your brother, Leonardo. He is so strong; but he cannot protect the most important part of himself. He too gladly lays his heart and life down for others… And the world above is cruel to spirits like his."

There was a time when Leo would have asked why. But he knew *why* now—because it was easy, after the first time. Cruelty was unamazing and easy… a habit.

"My son… you and Raphael have lived your lives on two very different tracks. He has always believed himself your equal, though I have set you out with more responsibility and power than any of your brothers, so that you may lead this family when I am gone. He has done this because he does not want you to be alone. You, on the other hand, have lived knowing the reality—that to lead is *to be alone* . Raphael would have been a strong option to lead, even though he is not the eldest—the responsibility would have grounded him, and settled his wandering; he loves and protects as fiercely as you train, and that is strength unto itself. I set you apart for this because I wanted you to learn, Leonardo, the consequences of power such as that you have always held, by virtue of being eldest and by your abilities and personality. Great responsibility comes with such a position. Raphael has followed you willingly for most of your life, because he believed your power to be a farce; he was wrong. And he has paid dearly for not seeing the terror that grips you when he does not believe as you do. And now you have learned what can be lost from this kind of terror—and you will not let them down again, Leonardo. You are ninja, a team of fighters, who must battle to survive in this world. You will be a better leader from this… you now fully know the price if you fail."

Conclusion, on the other side of gunshots, sirens, the snap of a bird's neck, a screen of tears over opaque eyes. The price of failure.

Past the days of punishment from his father in the dojo, bruises and lectures and holding kata positions for extended periods—the world would be his punishment, and his brothers would suffer. He saw again that screen of tears, betrayed and humiliated. *I will not fail* .

Leo was shaking, but he bowed and joined his brothers in training. He moved forward, with new determination. Failure was not an option.

That night when Leonardo slept, he dreamt of himself, lying beneath one of the grids looking up into Manhattan, and Raph lay next to him —listening to the traffic and voices above, laughing and speaking their secret language, and other times content in their own silence beneath the racket just above. Somewhere safe, away from the maelstrom's howling. No force on Earth could take at least this away from him, floating at the bottom of his mind. His heaven… his realization. When he awoke, he would miss it, and suffer. But in the dream he was happy… and in the life they led, this might be the best he could hope for.

The dream of a friend.

It was Master Splinter's custom on Saturday nights to make sushi, and let his sons cook pizza; the tradition had a dual air to it, with the raucous abandonment and fun of eating greasy pizza with strange toppings, helping Mikey roll dough and watching Donnie try to improve the sauce recipe and flinging cheese everywhere; but before that, during the day, the calm and tranquility of their father making sticky rice, ritualistically rolling the sushi, slow and steady— his sons often watched, at a safe distance from the raw fish, before going back to finding pizza ingredients, reassured by this weekly, constant image.

The week of the frightening training session, Raphael did not join his brothers in the fun and organization; he sat at the kitchen table most of the day, whittling chopsticks the way their father had shown them. When Splinter brought out the bucket of rice and began sprinkling

vinegar into it, he did not ask Raphael to move; they worked next to each other in silence, in their separate meditative tasks.

" *Sono hashi wa joushitsu-sasou ne* , my son," Splinter said, whiskers twitching.

"Thank y—" Raph began, before catching himself—Master Splinter had never known how much Japanese Leo had managed to teach him. He could feel his father's small smile, and went back to whittling. He found himself glancing up, curious, watching the way his sensei smoothed rice over a square leaf of *nori* , then placed long strips of whatever ice cold fresh fish he had caught that morning where the sewers met the ocean, along with spriggy lengths of cucumber and bright carrot. Raphael supposed it was how their sensei planned to live forever.

No good—Master Splinter had seen him looking—he went back to the chopsticks, but he was running out of timber. Obsessively, he went at the splinters and inconsistencies.

"Raphael… my son, I sense your pain," his father said, cutting through the silence of the den while his brothers were gone. "But I cannot help you heal unless you tell me what happened. Something from above has infected you and hurt you. It afflicts Leonardo as well… you both have always had a way of trying to bear each others burdens."

Raphael stopped whittling; his hands were shaking far too much. He cleared the wood shavings away, with down-turned eyes. His father's gaze never left him, as he washed his hands, and stood at the ready, as though to help. With a gentle look, Splinter passed him a handful of red and green onions.

"Your brothers will be needing the large ones for tonight's pizza experiment. I will be needing those scallions for miso soup. I would appreciate your help, Raphael," he said, with a small edge of cleverness to his voice.

Raph blinked—while they kept well underground, onions were not a common ingredient in their household because their sensei had avoided them, for reasons hitherto unknown. But he nodded and went to work, quietly. It did not take him long to figure out why Splinter kept them away; within minutes of starting on the red onions, his eyes began to sting and tear up uncontrollably. He would have passed this off as this the offending vegetables' fault even to his own mind, as he would out loud; but Raphael was the type who was unable to stop an emotion once it got going. Then it was there—Master Splinter's hand on his forehead, gentle and comforting. Brought down by root vegetables.

"I'm sorry I'm so pathetic," Raphael heard himself saying. "I promise I'll be stronger. I'll do whatever it takes."

He could almost hear pity in his father's compassionate words. "You *are* strong, my son. You have always been. Willing to take your brothers' burdens, willing to do what is below others, conscious of pain besides your own… this is the meaning of strength."

But Raphael was shaking his head; he felt the tears rolling down his face, beyond his control. "Anybody could do that. I'll be stronger from now on. I promise."

"My son… do you truly believe that just anybody could be who you are to our family?"

Raph couldn't answer, nor fight the sense of weakness and inadequacy eating away at him inside. It was his fault; he hadn't been strong enough. He wasn't strong enough not to have liked it. Now Leo blamed himself. But he would get stronger, and Leo would see he didn't have to carry him anymore. He checked his mind. What had he liked?

They had had a fight. In the sewers. In the pipe. A fight. In the sewers. In the pipe. Sunlight filtering down, the smell of ozone and hot dogs from the above, the hum of human voices, so many

dialects, their gentle rhythms. One world. A fight. In the sewers. In the pipe. Below the one world.

Tears were still rolling down his face, but Raphael had gone stone still, and Splinter watched his son, alarmed. Raph was looking ahead starkly, blankly, the knife dropping from his hands to clatter harmlessly on the table. Staving off panic, the old rat drew his son close, embracing him and wiping the tears from his unmoving, emotionless face. He gazed at him.

"What world do you wander into, my strong son? What fascinates you and terrifies you so in that place that you must leave me so soon? When I have had you for so short a time… What happens there that fills your heart with such anger and terror, robbing you of your mind?"

In his inner eyes he had a vision of Raphael, walking that dark and hazy line between their world and that of humans, on a tightrope, zephyrs and shadows tugging him this way and that—and the confusion, the trapped rage, when he felt he fully belonged in neither. Splinter knew since his boys were young children that Raphael would be the most susceptible, saw in him great extremes of emotion and sensitivity, inner conflict between the need for independence and comfort, perceptive eyes and ears that perhaps saw and heard too much, and too realistic to fight harshness with imaginary places or devotion to abstract learning. He prayed that it would not take further darkness to help his son find the way out of this in-between, and discover his place; yet he also knew that he must allow his son to face that darkness, head-on, to learn the only way he knew how. Experience. His strong, alone, angry and gentle Raphael.

Raph's eyes clicked back into life. *I will become stronger* .

This was his thought, though his reasons had vanished. Leonardo would bring their fight up to Raphael again, but discover he had truly been left alone with the burden. While his brother would be forever changed, he did not remember, the door shut tight against it. Leo

would pray that he could do the same, though such luck did not smile on him.

When Donnie and Mikey exploded back into the den, Leo on their heels trying to induce them to be calm, they found Raph watching and rolling sushi with Master Splinter, two piles of onions neatly chopped. He was quiet and insanely focused, as always, on the job, though of course his mind was somewhere else: just below the streets, walking in tune to the city. Leo kept his distance, mixing cheese, but Mikey and Donnie went directly in and began on the dough, loud and happy.

"Raph—raw fish, how do you *do* it?" Donnie asked, coating himself with flour.

"He's got a steel stomach, dude. Remember that time he ate that goldfish 'cuz Leo dared him?" Mikey chimed in.

"Aw, yeah, that was disgusting," Donnie pulled a face. Mikey almost broke into another one when a deeper, quieter voice interrupted them.

"Actually it was pretty good."

Four sets of eyes slowly turned to Raphael, who had been glancing at his father's sad, troubled face; though now, he was looking at Michelangelo, deadpan.

"Coulda used some ketchup, though."

Mikey's face had never lit up as much as it did then. *Raphi was playing with him* !

Donnie laughed. "Gross!"

"Hey, Raphi!" Mikey began—this was normally the part where everyone cringed, waiting for an emotional outburst. "Whaddaya get when you cross vomit with an all-America apple pie?"

Raph attempted a smile. "Your face on Fourth of July?"

Mikey acted mock-offended. "Nu-uh—Martha Stewart!"

"Coulda fooled me," Raph responded, his smile larger. Both Donnie and Master Splinter were laughing now—Leo watched, slightly far away, with a choked expression. At length he managed to smile some; his brother's heart was healing, if only by fractions. Even if right now he had no part in it.

Start Over . Someday, a long time from then, they would be whole again.

Raphael and Michelangelo became the new scavenging crew, after they were both thirteen; after a time Raph learned how to exchange rapid-fire jokes with his brother, to use his knowledge and his quick mind to quip sarcasms like shuriken. He guarded his little brother's sweet, good-tempered innocence like a hound, helping Mikey find comic books, steering him clear of the grungy parts of town, where he and Leo used to explore. He learned, for the most part, how to develop a tough shell against his brother's teasing, and give some back in kind. They were both volatile, and acted on first impulse—as the years went on, they proved increasingly difficult to manage, though Mikey taught Raph's cynicism how to have a sense of humor, while Raph taught Mikey how to have a real hero, who wasn't stuck in graphic novels or TV shows. No one saw Raphael's bravery like Michelangelo, and no one felt more invincible with his older brother there. Through protecting, Raph began to smooth out that unacknowledged spot where Leo hid in his heart—that immense portion that he had always laid aside for his twin, and that he blocked off, slowly chipping away at and reassigning portions to other people, other values. Mikey helped to reincorporate Raph in their family, brought him closer to Donnie, who also felt the comfort of Raphael's warm intensity and courage, and laughed as Raph and Leo butted heads on responsibility and leadership for the next two years.

When Splinter sent Leo away, it felt to him and Raphael like a long overdue punishment for something Raph continued to push from his

mind, and which often lay at the front of Leo's thoughts. Their father separated them, for the first time in their lives, truly and finally. He had been separating them, in truth, for years, all but in the physical reality; and when Raphael checked the mail and made his knuckles bleed in frustration, he felt the abandonment in all too real a way.

So he rode the darkness out, searching the streets in closed business windows and boarded-up doorways, in the tangled throughways and dead-end alleys of his mind, chasing his brother's shadow. If his father suspected, he never stopped him. And around the globe, Leo wandered, yet found no answers. Human beings were evil, and did evil things to one another; he could not reconcile this wicked world and its so-called judgments and words with the closeness he had shared with his twin, could not find answers or dogma or comfort better than his family—nothing wiser than his father steadily rolling sushi meditatively on Saturdays, nothing more joyous than Mikey's laughter as he rode his skateboard through the sewers, nothing more peaceful than Donnie reading a tech book and giving a steady, bored smile, nothing more transcendent than a look across an alley to find Raphael's grinning, defiant eyes that made the blood quicken, before charging into battle.

And when he returned, it was the demon in his brother's heart, Raphael who pinned him and betrayed him and nearly killed him, and they were even. Their eyes had been the same, in that terrible darkness. Worse to see his twin's confusion, flashing pupils, wondering why he had done this thing, what had compelled him, where his anger stemmed. Leo had gripped his carapace, looking into the monster he had helped create, who flickered back into his frightened brother, and ran. Confounded, in tears.

Endless betrayals, but they both led to the same truth. They were stuck with each other, and they loved each other. And Leo could be in charge all he wanted, Raphael would be the strongest all he wanted, but in the end, they were the same. It almost made Leonardo laugh. The very thing Raphael had always seen.

Hope and Hatred

Author's Note: Okay. Before I get any "Finally"s or "It's about time"s, just remember that last week I had three UCLA finals and a paper. I have written a nice long chapter for you that will tantalize, answer questions, make you laugh, make you cry… so enjoy. The next few chaps are in the works. You will also notice some experimentation with the songfic form, for my own purposes. The songs I reference are available on youtube—I recommend you listen to complete the story I tell, and get a feeling for the beat. And hey—you might like 'em.

Mikey had been an avid consumer of human pop culture since a rather young age, and he'd always thought this was a particularity of his that set him apart from his brothers. He collected magazines—everything from Golf Digest to Glamour, TV Guides to Nickelodeon, and read them cover-to-cover. He could tell you the proper putter to use to land it in the green, who the hottest movie star had been every month since 1983, what it meant to be an Autumn and exactly how to make Gak. He did none of this because he felt he belonged among humans… he just felt absolutely no reason why he shouldn't know if it interested him—which it did. Pop culture was something his brothers had known nothing whatsoever about growing up, and it had given him an edge of superiority, something he knew that they didn't. Somewhere along the line, however, without even realizing it, he'd picked up on something rather different from how to make your dinner table perfect for a yacht party or the difference between Samuel Adams and other domestic beers: he'd also rather subconsciously picked up on how humans psychologized. All the little tricks humans used to pick each other apart became his, a secret knowledge he wasn't aware he'd collected. Trashy magazine romance serializations, political cartoons, satirical banter, advice columns, hit bands and their lyrics, Goth poems, the secrets behind advertising tricks, letters to the editor, conspiracy theories, trivialities

and frivolities… all these things educated him and opened up to him, laying bare petals of mysterious knowledge for his perusal.

And despite all this, Mikey found he didn't care all that much for most humans. He felt no longing to be among them—he had his space and they had theirs and that was the end of that. He liked being a hero, and he wished the kids he saw at birthday parties had better lives, but he'd barely had time to feel these things before cynicism began to creep upon him, as though it had been laying in wait for him, yapping at his ankles. He had read so much about their detail-oriented, light-filled lives that there was an aura of unreality about human beings. Marriages, church on Sundays, kids at soccer, piñatas, even kitchen windows, were all somehow quaint and dreamlike. He would rather kidnap some of those kids and keep them down in the sewers to have Master Splinter for a father, and make those little humans real—real like him and his brothers and April and Casey.

Given all this, he supposed that what he really longed for was to know what Raph saw when he looked out at the human world, what about it was so magnetic and important to him. Mikey knew there were lawbreakers, but he and his brothers had always approached them like punching bags—wham bam, here's your purse ma'am. Not real. But sometimes the look on a punk's face, the way Raph would suddenly let one go after studying his expressions for a long time, made Mikey wonder if he was missing something. Pop culture—the pop culture he knew—didn't entirely cover the parts of town Raph had usually steered him away from.

It wasn't until Raph and Casey opened the shop that Mikey realized how important he'd managed to make pop culture to his brother—just in a different way from himself, which he expected from Raph. Raphael was obsessed by subcultures: rap, heavy metal, reggae, R&B, ska, Goth rock, punk… whatever he heard the grungier parts and groups rocking out to from beneath the city. Mikey always listened to mainstream techno, surf, and rock (whatever is mainstream is necessary knowledge to really know current pop

culture) and some more mainstream stuff he managed to get onto Raph's wavelength: Red Hot Chili Peppers, Rob Zombie, Smashing Pumpkins, Save Ferris, and, of course, Korn. Mikey felt rather sure that Raph regarded it as the nicest thing his little brother had ever done for him, burning him a Korn CD, because he played it everyday.

Mikey knew Korn. He knew their lyrics, he knew who listened to them. What bothered him was that he didn't get why his brother played them all the time, what Raph found so important about it. If he knew about things that Raph liked, it was coincidental, and there was still no why behind it. He could never tell which song was his favorite, what went on behind his eyes to make him seem so lost in it. Sure, Korn was angry music and Raph was a pretty angry guy—but he wanted to know what his brother thought about, what made him relate to the songs so fiercely as he worked, deaf to the world, on whatever vehicle lay in front of him.

Songs that pounded, and shouted, and wound the body into a groove, screaming yet somehow calming Raphael and soothing him, even as the ground shook under the impact of the bass, making of him the nucleus of a rapidly vibrating atom.

Mikey would sit in the driver's seat of the van, in the late afternoon on hot lazy days, listening to the music and watching Raph work, as though in a daze. ICP's "How Many Times" was on. Mikey remembered frowning at the part encouraging the beaten wife to go take out her husband with the butcher's knife… Raph was the Nightwatcher, why wouldn't he just go and save her? What about it did he seem to savor?

Mikey's thoughts almost found their way into the pounding groove where his brother sat, almost let his voice hitch. It wasn't fair that he didn't get it. Wasn't fair that he had to try and figure out his brother in this way, through such an arbitrary medium.

Advice columns didn't really talk about beaten wives, especially not in the older issues. That was something the mothers at birthday

parties whispered nastily about, pretending the clown wasn't standing there, as though he were a giant plushy. Again, somehow unreal. Heard too often to be shocking, with no explanation at all. Mikey could tell you all about how you could spot a battered wife. But the why?

Maybe that was Raph's department, after all.

He remembered looking over then, and watching his brother's mouth form the lyrics from the song, lost in a haze of his work, so like meditation.

"' *How many times will I ask myself why'* …" Folding over the grease rag, cleaning between the spokes. " *'How many times will I* …'" The next word was "cry," but Raph's eyes had clicked back into reality at that moment, and noticed the van, and Mikey inside, watching him. A quirked half-smile, an upraised hand in greeting. Mikey felt like he was waiting for a conversation that would never come. So unfair that they never spoke about anything of consequence. Jokes, teasing, more jokes. Trying to measure out his brother's life with head-banger lyrics.

" *How many times will I ask myself why?"*

Mikey opened the van door and sat sideways, munching listlessly from a bag of jelly beans. He typically did this while he watched Donnie work, who played classical and oldies, depending on what he had in front of him. He even liked to sit in the dojo sometimes while Leo was meditating, until that stupid New Age and those Japanese hymns drove him from the room. His brothers working always had a way of comforting him, though Mikey could never stay in a room long without making himself noticed, without trying to affect the scene he saw.

This perplexed him about Raph—who had always loved to plant himself in the den unnoticed and watch, acting like he was focusing on some inane chore, but who couldn't stand to not affect the human world, or sit idly by. Raphael, who distanced himself from his family

who would accept him and tried so hard to leave an imprint on a world that couldn't, and wouldn't.

The CD switched to Korn, "Falling Away From Me," one that Mikey *really* didn't get—and maybe didn't want to get. There was one thing he knew about the music Raph listened to, and it was that most of it spoke about pain, and being alone, and this frustrated him like nothing else.

I'm right here, you big crazy idiot.

For the first time, Mikey let it occur to him that Raph might actually be crazy, and all the time he'd spent making fun of the very idea, might have all been a bit too close to the truth. Such a strange thought, while sitting in the warm shop, with summer sunshine shining down through the warehouse windows, inside that brightly colored bodacious clown van, sucking on an apple-flavored jellybean.

" *Do what others say.*

I'm here standing hollow—

Falling away from me—

Falling—away from me."

Almost unnoticeable, the change in his brother, his mouth just barely forming the lyrics silently, the blinks that lasted just a millisecond too long. The song mentioned flirting with suicide… Mikey almost frowned. Why couldn't Raph listen to happy stuff? If he was hurting, why not listen to stuff that would make him feel better?

His mouth, forming the lyrics. Listening to the music, obsessively. He always had Korn playing when Mikey got home around noon.

" *I can always say:*

It's gonna be better tomorrow.

Falling away from me—

Falling—away from me."

This time, Mikey allowed himself a frown. Hope.

He'd heard hope.

The next day and the next—each day when he heard the songs again—the music somehow felt better and better. It made Mikey want to scream and walk and jump and yell and punch something and all of it felt good and felt even better just hearing the song. He almost understood. He wanted to tell Raph he was close to getting it, to feeling the message, that he just wanted a few blanks filled in, but there was no articulation for this—the music continued, screaming, pounding, into Mikey's brain. It was like Raph. It made him feel somehow more alive.

It was honest. His brother remained silent.

Raphael found it peculiar and disturbing to think that all three of his brothers could see where he was going—and not just because they were somewhere above him, crawling around in ventilation ducts. No, Donnie had put a camera in his helmet, and now all three of his brothers could see exactly what he did, and he could hear their breathing and voices through what used to be his police radio. The sound of that radio used to relax him, while setting his spine curved, ready and on-edge, to spring like a cat into the evils of his domain. Now… his brothers. He could hear Mikey still seething and complaining to Leo about having to sneak around and getting his eldest brother's patient responses; Donnie doing calculations and muttering about Mikey under his breath, occasionally exchanging a quip with Raph about the whining. Leo, when he wasn't repeating the same thing to Mikey every two minutes, merely breathed, and it was comforting, in a strange way.

Donnie's presence he could understand—Don had to guide him, and keep him away from security traps, so that was fine. Leo too, who had to back him up strategically and wouldn't survive anyway without something to ease the big brother senses. But Mikey? Raph didn't want his little brother under the helmet. He didn't want Mikey to see the enemies as close as Raph let them get… hear the sounds of them taunting and screaming and maybe even dying under the hands of the Nightwatcher… or hear Raph's pain when he was hit, or see the spatters of blood. Having his brothers so close made him uneasy. He was used to keeping them at a certain range… the ones he drew close were his foes, to let them into the pervading darkness—he let them gaze into the void under the helmet before he humiliated them or worse, and that was how it should be. Raph wielded the sai in battle, but an invisible bo in his personal life.

He was stalking around in a subsidiary building to the side of Karai's new headquarters, which he and Leo were able to find their way back to. He kept voicing how much like a set-up the whole thing felt like, but he also knew they had no choice but to walk into it. The advantage was the Nightwatcher suit, and the fact that his brothers wouldn't join combat unless they had absolutely no choice, even if Raph managed to disarm all the Foot he could. From what Donnie discovered in old blueprints of these warehouses, there should be a connecting tunnel between the one they were in and that being used by the Foot, and the ventilation system figured into it, allowing them to stay hidden—and Raph had confidence Don could hack any security system in existence, considering he had no trouble with the C.I.A. computers.

This thought caused Raph to smile, thinking of his whack-job older brother. Someday they would have NASA knocking on their door, and not even because they were giant mutant turtle creatures, either. Donnie probably knew more about their systems than they did. The Foot had nothing on that. He tuned his ear to his brothers talking as he stalked the warehouse, running his hands along the walls until he found an entrance to this tunnel, which Donnie was having trouble getting him to.

Mikey's voice again. "Leo, dude, this is retarded… why're we runnin' around in the vents when there aren't even any Foot? I feel like some kinda mouse."

"Mikey, I could care less how you feel right now. Stop complaining and keep going—I've already explained what we're doing a dozen times to you."

Donnie, under his breath, so only Raph could hear: "He has the potential to be so much worse than you, I swear."

"What, Leo, you just want Raph to get spiked in the back again? Wow, it's like you actually *plan* this stuff…"

Donnie's commentary, with an accompanying sigh: "Like that."

And Leo, who had definitely stopped breathing for a few seconds. "You know what, Michelangelo, I'm getting real sick of this really fast!"

Raph spoke into his headpiece at last. "Mikey, leave Leo the fuck alone before I have to haul this hundred pounds of metal up there and kick your ass. Your voice is makin' my brain bleed."

"Sorry, Raphi. Didn't realize you were makin' any attempt to *think* down there, goin' along with this stupid plan."

Leo again. "Michelangelo—shut the hell up."

"Ooo, Daddy's boy cussed, someone get the paddle."

Raph smiled despite himself—Mikey sounded exactly like him less than two months earlier and it meant one of a couple things: either Mikey and he really were alike, or Mikey had just paid a lot of attention to everything his brother ever said.

"Hey, Mikey. Stop stealin' my goddamn lines. I'm the only one who gets t' torture Leo, alright? You c'n have Donnie."

"Hey!" Donnie's voice sounded out, loud for once.

Mikey stayed quiet, though Raph could hear his breathing and movements. The three of them had headpieces like Donnie's, with partial clear viewing screens that extended over one eye—one part their own visuals, and one part Raph's. They could hear what Raph said to them, though they would have to switch channels to speak to each other if they got separated. The advantage was that Raph could hear everything they chose to say under their breaths and to each other in close proximity, while they could only hear him. A shared channel might have been better, though Raph suspected Donnie did it on purpose.

"Hey, Don—think I found a groove here or somethin'."

Donnie checked something over in his view screen, into which he had downloaded the place's schematics. "That's about the right place. You might have to pry it open—there's a fan here ahead of us as well, going in the same direction. We'll get it down and follow."

The opening was well-sealed, evidencing that the Foot knew of its presence. Raphael gouged at it extensively before he managed to get even a crack open; above and through his head set, he could hear his brothers dismantling a well-established fan amid a cacophony of grunts and a few swear words—and he was glad he couldn't see Mikey's glares, because they were so ferocious they practically had their own frequency. With glares, he supposed, practice didn't make perfect; the more a person smiled, the scarier they were when they finally snapped. That was Mikey and then some. Raph realized he liked to forget his little brother's emotions—it made keeping him at a distance a little easier. They had perhaps spoken about serious things twice in their lives… and both times Mikey had brought it up, and Raph had turned it down. So they used mediums like Batman, making fun of Barbara Walters, and Clint Eastwood to communicate, in roundabout, ridiculous ways. Even then, Raph never told Mikey what was important to him or gave his little brother any real way to understand him. He continued to be who

he was, and play his music, and speak about nothing, waiting for Mikey to get it.

Raph had a feeling his brother got it… he just refused to leave it at that. Had to keep pushing and pulling, see how far he could go. Wait for Raphael to change. Expect the impossible. The insane never change course… and if he was going to be called insane, Raph figured he may as well act the part. Leather-clad violent psycho. The receptacle of whatever his brothers' eyes wanted him to be. An empty shell.

Why was he here again?

Right. Liz.

"Hey… Mikey, how's the fan goin' up there?"

"Ask Don, this dismantling job was his brilliant idea."

Donnie's panting voice. "Almost… almost there… You?"

"I got me an opening. But I'll wait."

Leo's voice, droll and teasing. "What a little saint you are."

"Oh, gee, I'm sorry. I forgot you were Daddy's little angel."

He could hear Mikey and Donnie sniggering, and the way Don would try and hide it by coughing.

Leo's voice was an octave lower and strangely dark. "Oh, I'm fine with that, Raphi-boy. I'm not the one wearing the bondage gear."

Donnie was actually coughing by now, choking on his own spit from inhaling so suddenly. "O-okay, illegal object in the ring! That was just wrong."

Raph had the sudden urge to punch Leonardo, though the joke was perfectly fair. It had sounded like Leo had been completely incapable

of not saying it. It had the desired effect—Raph was lost in his head a little, thinking of ways to kill his brother, and thus had no response. Mikey, also, stayed quiet.

They were through the fan, and Raph began down a cobwebbed, little-traveled old passageway, which was actually more claustrophobic than the sewers, if such a thing were possible, trying to be silent and ninja while at the same time wearing enough metal to make a small tank. He missed swaggering around in Harlem, where just the sound of his footsteps gave the gang-bangers and drug-dealers nightmares.

After a silence, Raph heard Leo's low voice. "Everything okay down there?"

"What, you can't see for yourself?"

"Just answer the question."

Raphael rolled his eyes. "S'okay. Hard to hear with you three in my ears, but I'm kinda getting' the feelin' I'm walkin' into somethin' bad, y'know?"

"It's Foot headquarters. Of course it's something bad."

"Yeah, smart-ass, an' here I thought we were here for tea."

"You know, Raph, I've got my hands full with Mikey"—

"Stop bein' a prissy, Leo, I'm freakin' joking."

A pause. "I know." A sigh. "What kind of bad?"

"Aside from the kind that's tryin' to clone 'r build the Shredder? Dunno. Usually I'm excited 'bout a fight… this's makin' me queasy."

Leo's laugh, a bit easier. "Well, did you eat?"

Raph matched it, a low chuckle. "Yes, mother dearest. You didn't pin my mittens t' my armor though. And… an' where's my bracelet tellin' teacher t' give me my pills?" He could hear his brother's grin and picture it in his mind.

"Screw you, Raph."

"That the best you got? What, no more bondage cracks?"

"I would, but Donnie's met his quota for the day."

"He's got a quota? Always knew 'e was doin' somethin' on the side with all those computers."

Donnie cut in. "I hope you two are really enjoying yourselves, because you're not getting hot water for the rest of the month."

Raph chortled. "You're th' one that needs th' cold showers, Mr. Bondage Quota."

Donnie sniggered. "Hey, I'll remind you that Leo made the joke, so we all know where our dear older brother's mind is."

"Leo and cold showers? He'd make it some Zen mind-over-body thing. Probably like it."

Leo's voice was dry. "Your faith in me does you credit, little brother."

This time Mikey cut in, speaking between his teeth. "Considerin' yer sendin' him to the lion's den."

Don sputtered, Leo was probably glaring, but Raph spoke. "Mikey—I chose this."

"Doesn't matter. You're not Leo."

"Don't see your point, bro."

"If you didn't choose to, he coulda still made you. That's the point, Raph."

"Mikey… Leo wanted to wear it in my place."

Mikey scoffed. "We all know you'd never let Fearless wear that armor in a million years, Raphi."

"I told you NOT t' call me that, Mike."

"That's another thing—we never used t' call you *Raph* —what, you had to be all different an' choose some new nickname fer no reason"—

Raphael snapped before Leo or Donnie could settle Mikey down.

"Mikey, just STOP TALKING. Nobody cares about your mental vomit, ya goddamn blabbermouth, an' I hear 'nother word outta ya, the moment we get outta this place I'll kick your ass int' Hoboken. Got me?"

Mikey seethed, wishing with all his might that he could see Raph's face. "Ya know what, dude? *Screw you* . I hope the Foot kicks your ass so hard you get what I'm sayin'. Master Splinter said we're supposed to stay together—you let 'em take Lizzie, an' you don't give a *damn* if they kill you too! What's the stupid point of you? What the hell d'you think you're protectin', huh?"

They had stopped, Raph below in the dank tunnel that swallowed sound. Leo and Don watching Mikey, wide-eyed, as he argued into his headset, the whites of his eyes showing all around blazing blue irises.

" *You* , you idiot! Exactly what I was always taught to do!"

"What, with your life? An' they call me the clown. Your life belongs to *us* ! *YOU* belong t' us! You don't get t' go off an' die whenever the

hell you feel like it! We're supposed to get old! There's four of us! You don't have the *right* to turn us int' three after only sixteen years."

Silence on Raph's end. They could see through the visor—no movement. Raph was staring straight ahead, unseeing.

Then, in a strange, quiet, rasping voice: "You c'n have my life, Mikey. But…. *I* … I belong to *me* . Don't you ever forget that."

Silence on the other end. Up in the ventilation shaft, Mikey glared ahead for a moment before, with a quick, violent gesture, tearing the headset off and attempting to back-peddle through the tunnel and past Donnie, who grabbed him. They scuffled for a moment in the narrow space, while Leo watched from the front, trying to keep his eye on Raph's surroundings.

"Leo—you guys alright up there? What happened?"

Donnie pinned his little brother, keeping him braced by a bo neatly over his plastron.

"You *cannot* run out on us—you could get ambushed and we're here to save Liz, remember?"

Leo spoke under his breath to Raph. "Mikey happened. Give us a minute. And *don't run off ahead* , Raphael."

Raph rolled his eyes, straining to hear.

Mikey's voice, coming over Donnie's headset the clearest. "I'm not stayin' here—I'm not watchin' this! Lemme go, Don!"

"You're acting like a CHILD! Raph needs our help to do this, Michelangelo! I know you feel betrayed"—

"You don't know ANYTHING! I don't care! I HATE 'im!"

Leo's voice again, faint, thinly holding something dark and deadly in check. "Raph. Please don't go ahead. Whatever you do."

A long silence.

"I won't."

Raph couldn't have moved if Leo commanded him to. Somehow he suddenly felt the giant weight of the armor on his shrunken muscles, beating down on him. He'd traveled a thousand miles since he was a little kid, and hadn't gone anywhere at all… still worn down and eaten away at by his little brother's nasty perception.

The scuffle intensified above him; Leo ripped off his own headset, slid back, and grabbed Mikey out from under Donnie's furious grip, to slam him against the side of the shaft, his forearm pressed up and head-locking his little brother.

"You know what makes you a child, Mikey? You—never—see—the consequences—of what—you *say* !"

Mikey gasped a bit. "Whatsa matter, Leo? Maybe I just hit too close t' the truth, huh? You never did like it when Donnie n' I let on we knew some a' yer little secrets. Maybe we know what's up, huh, Fearless?"

Leo would not be intimidated; he drew his face closer, matched eyes with his baby brother, voice low and lethal. "And what is that, little brother? Go on. Don't hold it in. Tell the whole class."

Mikey swallowed. "I—I don't know. Exactly."

"You're fishing—just what I thought. Now's not the time and place, Mikey. You wanna get him killed? I don't get you—you say you want to save Liz and at the same time you act like a petulant little brat! Are you so incapable of understanding we're trying to undo this?"

"Can't undo stuff, dude! Not like this!" Mikey spat; he kicked Leo and they struggled for a bit, while Donatello leaned his shell against the shaft, keeping his gear out of the way, and acted as extra eyes for his brother below.

"Donnie, this is soundin' stupider and stupider the more I listen," Raph grumbled; Donatello glared at his siblings and snorted lowly in agreement, and Raph continued. "Too bad April's already left fer Japan—she'd tell 'em t' shut up."

"Um… everything in the green down there?" Donnie asked, feeling uncomfortable.

"Yeah, jus' hangin' out. Wish I had a Coke 'r somethin'. Why doncha jus' conk 'em with that stick of yours so we can get on with this?"

"I won't even get between *you* and Leo when you're fighting—you think I'd try with a completely pissed-off Mikey in the mix?"

"Aw, c'mon, big bro, Liz is countin' on us an' we're actin' like tweaked out boardin' school kids."

"You don't care about what he said?" Don asked, in an even lower voice.

"First off, whatever. He's pissed and he don't mean it. Second—better 'e *hates* me than not give a shit, right?"

Donnie arched an eye-ridge. "Wise words from the mouth of a maniac."

Raphael's bitingly sarcastic, mildly amused voice. "Yeah, well—since the lobotomy I've 'ad my lucid moments."

Donnie laughed. "Lobotomy? Now there's an idea. I'm amazed you survive on what nature put in your head—taking a chunk out would make you totally nonfunctional." Offhanded, he threw a smoke bomb a ways past Leo and Mikey; it exploded while Donnie, relaxed, put on a small gas mask and his goggles, listening to his brothers cough. By the time it was cleared away by the duct's fans, he had Mikey's hands and legs bound, and held up a roll of duct tape.

Leo, recovering with his eyes still watering, replaced his headset while Donnie held Mikey's plastron down with one knee.

"Shall I get his mouth, Leo?" Don asked, snapping a piece of tape threateningly.

"Knew he had a thing for bondage," Raph mumbled, hearing Leo's harsh breathing again.

"What d'you say, Raph?" Leo asked. "Duct tape?"

"Naw, just let him cool down for a minute. He wants to keep talkin', then whatever. I'll go ahead and one a' you can stay with him, while the other comes ta back me up. Don could probably do tech support from here if he wanted."

Don's voice. "We're not splitting up. We'll drag Mikey through the vents by the ankles if we have to."

Leo and Raph had a rare moment of reading each other's minds and both snorted simultaneously. Donnie glared.

"That comment had nothing whatsoever to do with bondage, you sick, juvenile… cephalopods."

By this time, Mikey was finally finished coughing, which had been made worse by lying on his back. "Totally lame Bosonova moment, Don."

Donnie pinched his cheek, hard. "Aw, Mikey—that was almost a joke. Have the malevolent adolescent hormones ebbed yet?"

"You guys suck. Ya never used ta tie Raphi up when he had an attitude."

Leo chuckled. "Shredder always did it for us—fun as it would be."

"Ouch, score two below the belt for Leo," Donnie commented.

Below, Raph sighed impatiently. "Right, real picture a' wit. Can we get this retarded ass circus on the road yet before my butt gets caught?"

Leo sighed reciprocally, gazing at Mikey. "I've got half a mind to send you home. But Don's right—separating isn't the best idea. But you better keep your mouth shut, or I'll let Donnie drag you by the ankles, and I can't guarantee he won't like it."

Raphael was laughing on his end. "You're on a roll today, Fearless. Better watch it, ya might let us think the stick up your ass got termites."

Leo snickered. "Oh no, Raphi—that was a smart joke. Don't overexert yourself on *my* behalf."

A snort. "Never gave me a chance to, Daddy's boy."

Mikey glared, unable to hear Raph's side of the conversation, but grasping some of it. "There any special reason he didn't just bite your head off for calling him 'Raphi', dude?" His gaze fell hard on Leo, that young, blazing blue look of scrutiny he hid so well beneath the paint of a clown.

Raphael heard the question; if he had an answer, he didn't voice it. Leo squinted into his right vision, where he could see the slight reflection of Raphael's eyes in his visor, underneath the dark helmet. Eyes who believed they could not be seen, staring back at him. Fathomless, black, unfrowning. Tunnels to the center of the earth, to the glowing core of a world. When Leo unfocused and shifted to his left vision and the ventilation shaft, he found something in Mikey's face he felt sure he didn't like—nasty, and perceptive, and a little too close to the truth—cruel and young and heartless. Edged with harsher cynicism, creeping within him like a virus. The right mix of innocence and sarcasm that could inflict virulent, pestilent wounds.

A mix Raphael once had, before wisdom won over innocence and replaced disillusionment. Before he learned to find hope in unlikely

places. Meaning in the gutters.

And Donnie. Poor, hapless Donnie. So desperate to protect Raphael and be big brother, and completely oblivious, recalibrating his devices and untying Mikey's knots, the picture of productivity and proficiency. Ignorant of the dark niches and sickly turns of his own family—ignorant of his own shadows, his own unhealthy obsessions. Leo couldn't help but think, looking on his oldest little brother, and wonder how Donnie couldn't have noticed, over a year and a half, whether Raph was playing vigilante every night. Who could be so wrapped up in their own world—a narrow universe within one almost just as narrow already—and never *see* it? Theirs was such a closeted existence, and still—islands, endless misunderstandings, that element of interminable chaos. Maybe making no pretensions at seeing was the most honest way of dealing with it. It was, after all, Raphael's soul, not Donatello's. Perhaps the most honest route was to allow Raph to face his demons, riding V-twin wings and the rush of night air, and not bother questioning. Leo had never been good at leaving things be in whatever configuration Fate threw them—not when it came to his family—not when it came to Raphael. But he knew for a fact Donnie had the seed of the same impulse buried within him, and its capacity was deadly.

Lost in his thoughts, Leo hadn't noticed that Raphael's vision was moving—he focused, and spoke, staring to crawl again through the shaft, leaving Don to untie Mikey.

"Raph—why are you moving?"

"Heard one big fucking noise, bro."

"No—stay put, give a second for Mikey and Donnie to catch up—I should be above you by now. What did you hear?"

"I heard—Leo, man, I heard that freakin' metal Shredder bot that busted us last time, really goddamn close by."

"That's impossible—this tunnel's sealed and it hasn't been used for years. I mean, look at it."

"I know what I heard."

"Maybe you're… well…"

"I AM NOT hearin' things, Leo. What, you think I got PTSD from gettin' a nick in the face last time 'r some shit? I'm not a goddamn baby, Leo, for crissake"—

"Calm down and take stock of your surroundings, hothead. You don't have to fly off the handle…"

Then, the discontinuance of Raph's movement as another sound cut them off, splitting through the ventilation and the tunnel below, so they both heard it twice over, echoing back over each other's lines.

A female, inhuman, gurgling wail—followed by a scream. A child's, a girl's, terrified, and very real.

"Liz… Hell, Leo, I'm not waitin' for those two…"

Leo, however, was already galloping, bent-double, along the vent towards the sound, aware that Raphael was running below him, and that Donatello would hear the sound on his line and come to meet them. They moved blindly, harsh breathing, along parallel trails through darkness for a short while—before both stopped short, in the same place.

Leo encountered a cobwebbed vent; Raphael, a brick wall, crusted over with mold, and showing holes where pieces had fallen away, revealing chinks of light. Raph, and, carried with him, Leo, gazed through a hole.

It was a large chamber, not unlike the place where they had met with the metal *youkai* , but it possessed a loft level, formed out of metal lattice grids, as well as a sheer glass wall into the next room.

Raphael's heart stopped beating, and they could both hear it.

Karai had the bundled child they'd called Elizabeth on the loft level, with a Foot soldier holding the tiny struggling arms back, as she lifted herself off the ground fiercely back against him, as though working to get away from deep horror. Karai herself had her *tanto* drawn but in a relaxed position, ready to use at any moment. The room was full of Foot soldiers, many standing in a corner, repairing the debilitated *youkai* , from which mechanical screeches emitted every now and then—still missing its head.

Behind the glass were more soldiers, all of them working in concert towards a singular goal—holding several chains, attached to a woman, who currently rubbed herself against the barrier. She—it—was covered in slime and her hair was tangled with water and organic run-off. She—it—had no eyes, save black, oozing portholes to Hell, a worm nodding with the creature's jerking movements. She—it—had on the garb of the long-homeless, layers of mismatched clothing, rags, black-smeared, rotting with water seepage. She—IT—had a massive, wound through her center that continued to well with dark liquid and moving entities. She—it—was moving, and clawing fruitlessly at the glass, in response to Lizzie's screams.

Raphael and Leo had another rare moment—once not so rare—of reading each other's mind and speaking in unison.

"HOLY SHIT."

Then Raph was backing away from the wall, and Leo was breathing hard, thankful his vision had been cleared of the grisly sight, and half-wishing to see it again.

"Th-that was… we saw her… she was *dead* . Dead. Totally, completely, no-doubt-about-it"—

"Goddamn it, Leo, I was there, I know… but that's the same lady, right? That's the same one… you 'n Donnie saw her lots better'n me… you be the judge…"

"Same one… except she still had eyes last time we saw her… maybe the worms got her before she… what, reanimated? This is… maybe this was what Karai was working on to bring Shredder back?"

Raph had shaken off some of the shock by now. "Man, I… I gotta get through this wall… the mortar's soft-lookin', from the moisture on this mold… should come apart easy enough."

"No—Raph, wait. Let me recon this a little before you go charging in… this—woman, whatever—is a new element we have to take into consideration."

"Shit, Leo, they're torturin' Liz for info by showin' her that *thing* and callin' it her mother, you gotta be"—

" *Think* , Raph! You've must've done more than just charge in on emotion and instinct during your solo act, so do it now!"

"Not when somethin's *this* fucking wrong, Leo…"

Lizzie's voice, high and piercing. "That's not my mom—what'd you *do* t' her?"

"She has been like this since before she blew up my father's lab with your miserable help," Karai responded, clear but angry. "And I know she took the data with her, to use as a bargaining chip. She would have been a fool not to. They are hidden within you, child, and I know you have the key—was it a computer chip she embedded in your brain? An invisible tattoo? How are you hiding the plans? And you *will* tell me, or that suffering creature that was once your dear *o-kaa-san* will experience even greater mutilations. Or perhaps she will grow hungry… do you think she would like a nice, warm child's finger? Like an *oni* , hmmmm?"

Lizzie kicked out at her; Raphael was gasping, going at the mortar savagely with his sai while gazing fixedly through a hole in the wall.

"Why're you *doing* this? Don't you have a mother?" Lizzie's voice was so different. Strong, but not clipped.

"No!" Karai jerked, raising her *tanto* . "I have a father only. His name is Oroku Saki, and your turtle friends, the sons of Hamato Splinter, took him from me. I never had the chance to say so much as a goodbye to him. But I am reconciled to them and the vendetta between our fathers. I am prepared to make peace in my generation. But I shall not stand idly by when I know the late Dr. Stockman had almost brought him back to me. Your mother killed the doctor in that explosion… I cannot recreate the experiment without the plans he devised, and for that I need you. So you will *speak* , child, so that one of us at least can have their parent. I am sorry your mother had to meet her end as she did. But she has been dead since that day, despite walking and talking. You must understand that I did not murder her in the sewers that day. You must try to understand what I am trying to do."

Lizzie kicked again, and this time made contact, on Karai's sword hand. "Mom said the Shredder was a bad man, and the doctor was making an even worse one, who he could control and hurt people. I wish she made sure everyone would forget the plans. But I have them, and I'll never give 'em to you! You don't understand *anything* !"

Leo was frozen, assessing the situation, using his brother's eyes.

"Her name… she's Saki's daughter. Now I understand… that's why she's been playing dirty. She'll do anything to get her father back. Even… break her honor."

He heard sound behind him, aware that Don and Mikey were finally catching up to their position.

He heard the grating sound of crumbling moist mortar and bricks, the sickening crunch of metal on red stone, his brother's harsh breathing.

"Raph… maybe we wouldn't do much different, for Master Splinter… even for each other. I mean—we handed a child over to them."

"What the hell're you gettin' all psychological 'bout, huh? Ya better be reconnin' up there"—

"Raph—it's just… being angry with Karai won't bring Master Splinter back, or Lizzie's mother. Grab Liz, and get yourself out… okay?"

A more horrifying crunch; Raphael's sai quivered, buried in the wall beside his own head—he held onto its handle, as though using it to support his own weight.

"You… ya say that like he's dead 'r somethin', bro…"

Leo's silence set a wave of fright through him he never thought he was capable of. At last, his big brother spoke.

"He's not with us. I always thought I'd know if our father died… but I see Liz, and I'm suddenly sure how wrong it was. How smug. The world is always prepared to hurt you in new ways, the moment you let down your guard, or look to it in awe."

Raph slowly drew the sai back out, and resumed gouging at the mortar, taking the wall apart quietly, stealthily, realizing he may be detected. The were taking the woman creature away from the glass; Lizzie had her mouth clamped shut; the soldiers continued repairing the *youkai* , making it wail every so often.

"So… wha' happens, when it's jus' you, Leo? Now 'r later… I mean, someday's jus' gonna be you, right?"

Leo continued using his brother's eyes, taking stock of every enemy position, every vent covering and exit visible, monitoring Raph's breathing along a subconscious wavelength. How many times had he counted his brother's breaths, listened to them in the realm of the real, the realm of dreams?

Lying below Raph's bunk while he slept, taking stock of his position, picturing every slumbering movement.

Long-distant dreams, that recalled their burrow as toddlers, soft breaths as his little brother clutched his plastron, sluggish from cold.

Panicked breathing, enraged gasps, pained torrents of air, half-dead and half-crazy rasps. Breathing puzzle of a twin. A million breaths chronicling a life which he owned.

"I… I don't know, Raphi. Turtles live a long time. All I know is I'm going to keep us together. Beyond that…"

A clear voice, that stabbed him. Compassionate, that understood too much.

"I know you, Leo. Nothin'll change. You'll be scared, even after he's gone. Cause you don't know what yer scared of."

Leo found his hands gripping the openings in the vent in front of him, making his knuckles pale. It felt as though he were restraining his own body, though the way before him was blocked.

Donnie and Mikey were only ten feet behind him, clambering through the vent, both being as silent as possible.

Raph had at least twenty lose bricks—enough to hammer his metal-clad body through the wall and barrel into the nearest group pf soldiers.

Donnie had honed in on their position with his PDA; he and Mikey had obviously had a little chat, as both their headsets had not been replaced on their ears.

Leo nodded. "Let's do this."

Missing Points of View

Author's Note: These two portions were supposed to be part of the next chapter… but it's just too long and I want to give the action in that chapter the attention it deserves, as well as the vague revelations in these sections room to breathe and ruminate. Next chapter up soon. And because I don't do it often enough, let me say thanks again to Kyt for reading EVERYTHING I write and giving me assistance every night—as well as Airy and Tri for their constant readership and feedback.

Leo's voice dimmed; Don kept his stern eyes averted for a moment, working on Michelangelo's knots to get him untied. Mikey watched, with a cutting glare that tingled the top of Donatello's dome head.

"You know what I'm talkin' about. The way sometimes things jus' feel wrong."

Donnie took a breath, steeling himself. "Here's what I know: I like having my brothers alive. We're a team. If those two have problems, they'll deal with them, and unfortunately it has nothing to do with you and me."

Mikey blinked, rubbing his wrists. "Hey—you… you saw somethin'. Ya see it, dude, just like me. How can you… I mean, can't ya tell me what really"—

Donnie shot him a distinctly dirty look. "To what point and purpose, little brother? You've already proven you can't handle what little evidence you actually have in a mature fashion—why would I provide you with more? Leo may be a control freak and Raphael may be emotionally self-indulgent, but they never go out of their way to hurt people. And sometimes in a family, Mikey, you've got to learn that honesty *isn't* always the best policy. All I see is someone who's about to get one of his brothers killed"—

"Oh, like you're one to talk"—

"I was trying to help"—

"Oh, sure, 'cause world genius Donatello has to have the answers and fix everybody—maybe Raph *isn't* the problem, ya ever think of that?"

Donatello stared at his little brother, seething, and trying not to show how hard he was breathing, trying to keep his rage in check.

"You are so goddamn naïve, Michelangelo. If… if you really knew, you'd regret every single word coming out of your mouth, and I couldn't even do that to you."

Mikey nearly spat in his face. "They're my family—I've got a *right* to know, it's not cool for you t' just decide"—

Surprisingly, Don smiled, slightly twisted in the vent's strange light. "You'd be amazed how little you know about your family and still manage to be happy, Mikey. Cherish it. You've got the rest of your life to be a bitter, cynical adult convinced there's no goodness left in the world." He began to crawl past, to catch up with Leo and Raph, but Mikey grabbed an arm.

"What'd Leo do to 'im?" Mikey was serious, his eyes almost desperate, thirsty to understand—Don held the key to everything, the Rosetta Stone to translate the strange language of their brothers, fit the pieces of their lives into a cohesive story, all points of view present and accounted for. Yet too often it seemed they had his own, a limited amount of Don's, the leader named Leo, and a canvas, a speakerphone, that stood in for Raph. He felt—could feel palpitating—under the surface of his three brothers a collective second world: Leo and Raph, two people under the leader and the mask, and the eyes that knew all collecting and storing their endless information, never to be unlocked, within Donatello. As though their family—the face he saw—was all an elaborate conspiracy, to keep himself innocent and Master Splinter assured of something else. Of *their*

innocence, perhaps. Mikey narrowed his eyes. Don wrenched his arm away.

"I'd rather believe there was something off about Raph's mind, Mikey. Something he'll grow out of. If he lives that long."

And then Mikey glimpsed it—the desperate, haunted lie Donnie held viciously onto, flashes of their past, everything his older brothers had strove to protect him from, Don most of all, before it disappeared behind a practiced veil, cutting him off.

A world out in the sewers.

The snap of a pigeon's neck.

Raphael grasping a rotting bird, a maggot working away in the eye.

Words, innumerable, that could never be taken back.

Crazy, stupid, disturbed .

Mikey smiled disbelievingly. "Kids are jus'… cruel, y'know?"

Don's return smile was the most sardonic his brother had ever seen it, and it sent a chill of fear down his spine. "Then why do you still act like one?"

Young and cold and cruel and heartless—the glorious freedom of innocence hungry for knowledge capable of breaking even the strongest mind. Michelangelo felt he was walking in someone's prints sunk deep into snowdrifts.

While Leo was gone, Raphael seldom made himself visible to his family; he was as he had been as a preteen, watchful and silent, a guardian spirit—appearing and reappearing around the den. But one day he found himself in the meditation room, standing in the doorway. He despised the new dust, collecting on the partially-burnt

candles, and on Leo's lovingly-collected books. Master Splinter hardly ever stepped foot in here without his eldest son, as though it lost its ability to calm the mind when the presence that had once charged it had fallen off the face of the earth.

Raphael's own books were here as well—it was ideally the meditation room for all of them, but it was a place supplied for willing meditation—unlike the dojo, where they had to do it. He took down one of Leo's bound volumes of Japanese poetry, lightly swept off the dust, turned to a random page.

But the page wasn't random. They were twins. The pages fell open, and Raphael, from long years watching his brother finger the book, knew where the find the most important poem. He could see the oils from Leo's hands most prominently here, glossing the paper, occasionally smearing the ink. Blotches from sewer run-off, green and black.

Basho.

"Wandering traveler,

Never settled long in one place—

Like a portable fire."

It made him sick to miss his brother, sick with something beyond simple pride or jealousy. Pride and jealousy were thin veils that something deeper, hiding sometimes even from himself, sat behind, in wait. But Raph knew he missed him. Knew Leo couldn't miss him back.

It was such a wide world, that Raph ached to be part of. How could Leo resist feeling the same?

They were twins, after all. If he could live somewhere else, he'd go too.

He would join Leo, and reside in another place. But he was tied to all those voices, the beat of his city, the roar of the subway, light through gratings, some distant, dreamlike memory. The scent of the street, sometimes unpleasant but made wonderful with the tingle of nostalgia that needed no thought, only feeling.

"Raphael—my son, what are you doing in here?"

Raph snapped the book closed, startled, and hurriedly tried to replace it, stammering. Like a child caught masturbating, a toddler with his hand in the cookie jar. There was no explanation that could logically make it go away, no alternative. It felt bad, somehow. Like an accusation.

Leo is off on a mission of great import. You should be happy for *o-nii-san* , not grieving his absence. Someday, your father will be transformed by death—you must rejoice in it, for traveling to new places is a cause for celebration. And then *o-nii-san* will be prepared to keep things going in father's stead.

Raph didn't want to celebrate. He wanted to throw the book against the walls of his thin imprisonment, that black glass cage, woven and melted with shadows. He instead ran a hand along the book's binding, after failing to fit it into the bookshelf.

"I'll get out—sorry, sensei"—

Then felt a clawed hand on his shoulder, laced with comfort, and shuddered, shaking off the dread.

"It is okay, Raphael. Do not be ashamed of missing him. We are all aware that this is hardest for you—but it is necessary for both of you to grow into new people." His eyes fell on the book in Raphael's hands. "You know Leonardo's favorites, without ever having read them. You know their meanings, without knowing all the kanji. You know why they are important, and when he is thinking of them, even when he is half a world away. Tell me what poem haunts him now, my son."

The dusty candles were still unlit, and would remain so, until Leonardo's late return. Raphael opened the book, distractedly, to the page he'd had before, but stumbled to his feet—leaving it open on the tatami mats.

"I—I can't, sensei. I'm sorry. I'll get out."

And hurried from the room, without looking back. Gazing through the years at his brother, at his incomplete books, at his damaged, well-loved volumes, at his search for truth, all ending in such strange words. The traveler, a fire carried from place to place. Two flames, twins, one burning forever ensconced, while the other flitted around the world, proton and neutron.

Several hours later, Raphael passed the room again on his way to prowling the streets, and paused. Master Splinter was still within, gazing meditatively at the page he'd left open, as though he may channel his son through its power. The candles were lit. Like a moth around a flame, Raph remained in the hallway, sunk against the wall and sitting on the ground. That night he was not the Nightwatcher.

It was Leonardo's seventeenth birthday. And more than eleven months after he was supposed to return.

Raphael fell into a fitful doze in the hallway; when he awoke, he was lying on the floor in the meditation room. Leo's letters—the ones he had written to Splinter while he had still been doing so—were spread out over the floor. Master Splinter had a steady gaze on his second youngest.

"You have been my steady hawk over the mail, Raphael. Did he write today?"

Raph shook his head, glaring at the mats. He realized he was resting in the fetal position, but felt a strange fatigue melting the control over his heavy limbs. Leo was probably ecstatic wherever he was. No little brothers to look after. No sewers to hide in. No bastard New

Yorkers who didn't give a crap about anyone. Splinter seemed to read his son's thoughts.

"Leonardo would never be happy without his younger brothers. Nor without you, Raphael, in particular. You know him better than this." There was compassion, and even pity, in the old rat's eyes. "But believing he is happy wherever he is must make it easier to deal with his persisting absence."

"I hope he never comes back." Raphael meant it when he said it. Leo would have come back if he missed them—either he was dead, or he didn't want to be watching three ridiculous little brothers and take their father's place. He'd taken the first sane step he could, and escaped them. Raph had never known Leo was capable of doing something for himself, for his own sanity, for breaking the yoke over his shoulders.

He just supposed he'd always thought Leo would take him with him.

"Denial is the forerunner of a deep love, my son."

It was morning already. Morning on Leonardo's birthday. The second one he had spent away from home… why celebrate another year of life, though, when you don't even know if they're still alive?

Don and Mikey were moving around outside the closed door; desperate not to let his brothers see him lying down, Raph hauled himself into a sitting position, still staring at the mess of letters… the envelopes with Leo's neat, controlled print, more beautiful when writing hiragana than roman symbols.

Splinter was watching Raphael, his expression clearly showing that he knew what his sons did not: his second youngest was deeply depressed, and living in a broken household, which existed on a thread, its members confident Leonardo was either dead or not coming back. No one held this knowledge so closely and so near to the front of his mind than Raphael. The others worked to keep their minds off it—each had reachable dreams and aspirations and goals.

But this one was a fighter, a survivor. He was surviving for his brother's return, subsisting on grains of hope, drops of optimism. His realistic, pragmatic son who saw the today and the actual, and acted. Who was rapidly losing to the overwhelming evidence that his twin was lost, with very little to save him from the fall.

Donnie burst in, ducking his head inside the door, with the actions of one who doesn't expect to find what he's looking for in a room but checks anyways, for form's sake. He seemed surprised to see his father and brother within, but concealed it quickly.

"Master Splinter? Your tea's ready, and Gilmore Girls is almost on."

His light brown eyes fell on Raphael, and narrowed.

"So you *are* home. Mikey thought you hadn't made it back. Make sure you do the dishes before you go to sleep again." His voice had a ring of disgust in it, but carried the tone of an older brother, now getting used to being in charge. "If you're going to act like a bum, you can at least do your kitchen duties."

Raph's voice was quiet but biting. "Whatever, Don."

"Hey!" Donnie cut back, as though expecting it. "We're all aware of your attitude, Raph. You didn't respect Leo and you don't respect me, fine—but you know what's expected of you."

"Donatello!" Master Splinter's voice rang out. "Respect is earned, not demanded. You hold a position because you are now the eldest, but be careful how you view this power. Remember that it is fortified by ties of family and compassion, not of duty or force. Your brother is not working to disappoint you."

Donnie sent a biting glare at Raph. " My brother isn't working at all. Maybe he'd stop feeling like a violent Neanderthal with lethargic slumps if he had some purpose. Leo isn't the center of the universe. This house can't just stop because he's gone."

"Everyone adjusts to new realities in their own way. Perhaps Raphael has accepted a different reality than you, Donatello."

Donnie squinted at his brother, who was picking up and turning over repeatedly one of Leo's letters to Splinter. He didn't seem to care that his father and brother were speaking about him as though he wasn't in the room.

"That shouldn't surprise me," Donnie mused, then cocked his head at Raphael. "Raph—if Leo was dead—well, you'd know, wouldn't you?"

No eye contact, but he'd been heard. "How would I know that, Don? 'm not some sorta Ouija board." Of course. Realistic Raphael, rearing his ugly head.

Donatello sighed, sure he wouldn't get anything more out of his opaque, impossible little brother. "Okay, whatever. Don't forget the dishes."

"Heard ya the first time, brainiac. Doesn't take a genius t' do the dishes."

Don narrowed his eyes, stared hard at his younger brother for a few moments. He could accuse Raphael for opaqueness, but he'd be in the center of a pot and kettle moment. The key to being a middle brother was constant compromise—and since you always had to be so many things at once, sometimes it felt best to distance others from your real self. Always in flux, metamorphosing—invisible, in the lime light, little brother, big brother, walking on eggshells.

But Leo had always been enough big brother for all of them. Raph had been allowed to never see Don as an elder; he could go through a day without answering anything to Donatello aside from what kind of pizza he wanted. Changing things now felt impossible. And Don didn't want to deal with that pool of issues and tangle of trouble that was Raphael. It wasn't his job to unknot his little brother and figure out what was wrong with him… but if Don wanted to be honest, if he

looked closely, he wouldn't have to search long. Not seeing it now was more a work of denial than ignorance. And he had pride and feelings too. Maybe he wanted Raph to come to him.

But maybe Raph had learned that too much pain comes of trusting in your older brother.

Master Splinter sighed, and Donnie slipped away, aware of his sibling's insecurity. Their father stood, as Raphael gazed at the letters.

"I encourage you to read them. Perhaps you will have some idea of where he has gone, my son, and what he is experiencing. I wish to speak with Donatello."

Raphael nodded slightly, grimly, in a slight daze. His father swept out. He picked up a letter, and saw that Leo had written it in Japanese.

Father—

I couldn't sleep. I will be meeting with the Ninja Council tomorrow, and the Ancient One has already had a talk with me (Raph noted Leo used "Watashi" form, even when half asleep… what a straight-nosed kiss-up… his kegon polite speech was immaculate) *and I am feeling nervous. If you ever send my younger brothers* (here it was just "otouto," and since Japanese has no plural nouns, Raph had to assume that Leo meant all of them) *, my warning will be to watch words with the Ancient One. He can perceive a weakness the moment one opens their mouth. I hope you are well. My training is drawing near its end, and I miss home. I enjoyed the letters when I got here—they fortified me against what is soon coming. Despite writing to you, I have had little opportunity to receive letters back, and it was a great gift.*

My brothers will be expecting messages.

For Don: Hold it together, keep training, and keep an eye on Mikey. I know you have a great leader in your spirit; let it grow while I am gone and I will look to you for strength when I return. Don't let your technology obsess you, or the budget. We have always pulled through before.

For Mikey: Your letter made me laugh in the middle of the night at the Ancient One's home, but it was the first time in months. I cannot thank you in the proper words for that. Keep your smile, and don't annoy Raph too much.

There was a gigantic ink blot on the portion meant for Raphael. Mistakes, erased, scrawled out, kanji and hiragana, all jumbled. Below this, was English, plain and burning.

Raphi: I don't even know what language to write you in. But… Ore te (savois) comprends, otouto. Stay alive. Stay out of trouble. (Anata) kimi ni ai suru.

Raphael blinked at it. When Master Splinter had come to them to pass on Leonardo's messages, he had evidently not known what to make of Leo's note to Raph. He boiled it down to a sentence, with a hand on his son's shoulder, as for comfort.

"Your brother loves you, and reminds you to stay out of trouble." To which Raph had nodded, concealing that he cared. Don's had been word-for-word, translated into English, and Splinter had read between the lines to embellish on Mikey's. Raph suspected Splinter knew something lay in Leo's message, and it was meant to be read, not heard. It could not be translated, lying outside of language. It fed the blood, made hair stand on end. Intensity of feeling lay in the hurried, mother-language scrawl. Leo thought in English, no matter how proficient his Japanese—this bastardized, in-between language carried the essence of what they were, of what Raph and Leo were, of a world outside their father's grasp.

But Raphael knew that every word choice had particular meaning. "Ore" for familiarity, different from the Watashi in the rest of the letter;

the French *comprendre* because it was a verb that denoted its difference from another that meant "to know." *Comprendre,* to know as one knows a person, not a fact. Otouto, with no honorific, for the respect and affection in the title. Then English, to strike him and let there me no room for compromise or misunderstanding. A cryptic "I love you," with a meaning so easily changed given the pronoun choice. Raphael found his mouth moving, looking for the message's sound. It had flowed better with *savois* . Perhaps Leo had known it too. But could he be known like a fact? Perhaps there was some formula, some equation.

There was a greater message in the sound and choice of each language—the stress-free flow of Japanese, the leaping lilt of interspersed French, the harsh, mumbling and familiar sound of English, contrasting strangely against the others.

Stay alive. Stay out of trouble . It was his big brother talking, that voice and all its quirks speaking in Raphael's ear—sharp commands, expectations, filled with worry and responsibility and duty.

The rest came from another Leonardo, another voice—a heart voice, someone younger, the echo from deep within, as spoken inside a tunnel, the metallic thrill, a forgotten song.

Raphael put the paper down abruptly, suddenly confused. He felt a flush crawling upon his neck and up his face. The letter was dated nearly a year ago. Raph gazed at the others. Only one dated after it, also sent from the Ancient One's; and of the rest—fifteen months ago, thirteen months ago, several from sixteen months past, when Leo had been gone three weeks or so—when they didn't need his letters. Confusion. His brother could be anywhere, why were they looking to Raph to figure out what was going through Leo's head? Whatever it was, and if he wasn't dead, it was probably some kind of demon.

Raphael hoped his brother discovered it, and destroyed it, and then found out it was best to stay away from home, and be his own person, instead of the Great and Powerful Leonardo, the bearer of all

burdens, master masochist and elite older brother. Perhaps he'd found that person, in another language, through another voice.

Raph shook his head, confusion deepening, and shifting slowly into anger, fans of frustration. He shouldn't want Leo to come back. It was selfish, and weak, and cowardly, and… god, as emotional and needy as his brothers always wanted him to be and that he always ended up showing, despite himself at his best. It even seemed crazy to want him back, when all evidence said that it would be better for Leo to stay away. He knew that in some ways he still needed his older brother… but needing had nothing to do with *wanting* , and he wanted Leo back. Confusion.

But the magic of his anger was its power to invert. He warped those feelings and tucked them inside, to be used against some criminal that night, and the next, and the next—he would bash heads against trashcans with the power of his wanting and the fury at himself until blood and the cold night air had stripped him raw.

Ore te savois, o-nii-san. Anata ni ai suru . It flowed better that way… a puzzle of sound waiting to be completed.

Now…

Bury it.

Falling Away

Author's Note: Warning for some graphic violence. The movie reference to *The Boondock Saints,* as well as the Korn songs (and music videos) to "Falling Away From Me," "Make Me Bad," and "Twisted Transistor" are all available on YouTube for the curious. Enjoy!

Raphael always did know how to make an entrance, and accompanied by a full metal and leather get-up, two long *manriki* chains, and enough anger to bring the Brooklyn Bridge down around their ears, Leo had no trouble imagining the frightened looks on every Foot soldier's face as they scurried away from the exploding brick wall. Meanwhile, he led Donnie and Mikey, who were too quiet for his liking, to a spot in the ventilation ducts large enough where they could stand, and look down at the entire room, in a hanging tunnel parallel to the loft where Karai and Lizzie now stood. They removed a grating and watched the scene below them, with a bird's eye view on one side and Raphael's vision on the other—fast-paced and half-insane. Leo half-expected to see the same red flaring up in front of his brother's eyes.

"Raph, watch your left, your friend there has a *bisento* "—Leo warned, and listened to the bloodcurdling crunch as Raph swung left, breaking the soldier's nose and mule-kicking them ten feet away. They were right to send someone in armor—from the purple tinge on every bladed weapon's end, Leo could tell that Karai had ordered poisoning for each.

"Disarm and unmask the intruder!" Karai shouted from her perch, now personally holding Lizzie back from escaping into the chaos, her aide having gone in to join the fray. "Leave him alive until I have identified him!"

"Swell," Donnie said sarcastically. "She's really going to kill him if they ever get that helmet off."

"Thanks for the tip, Leo," Raph grunted, throwing a body into a heap of others, letting them scramble not to kill each other with their lethal blades. "And don't sweat it, Don. These guys're like trainin' dummies."

"Training dummies with brains, superior numbers, and highly dangerous alkaloid poisons on all of their weapons, little brother," Donnie reminded, sternly. Raph snorted, punching a soldier deftly without looking at them. He operated far better when he had no one to protect—his movements smooth, practiced, at ease, even dispassionate. He was just the Nightwatcher, breaking heads… no victims at the scene, no brothers to watch, no children to save. Only his life and the enemy. He had a rhythm, a kind of beat—punch, duck, lash with a chain, hook and swerve, punch again, an intricate ballet with a thousand partners, visible and not. He was getting lost in it, forgetting why he was there, flying in the moment, moving in one place.

While Donnie kept track of enemy weapons on his PDA and charted all the routes in and out of the room, while Leo carefully acted as second eyes for Raphael and told him when someone got too close or reminded him when he saw something Raph might not have, Michelangelo used the bird's-eye-view to watch, with a flaring blue intensity, each of his brother's practiced actions, never missing a single movement. Talking, for some reason, never seemed to disrupt that rhythm—if anything, Raph incorporated it into his moves, spoke in tune to his feet. Just as in the warehouse, he could see his brother, separate from himself, standing in his world and his element, a presence alone and unaccounted for, unexplained.

Lizzie broke away from Karai and ran to the edge of the loft, gripping the handrail desperately as she looked down at the trespasser. She, like Mikey, studied the Nightwatcher's moves.

"Raphi? RAPHI!!!"

Raph turned, despite himself.

"Damn," Leo hissed.

"Shit," Raphael agreed, as Karai's eyes widened, before a cunning look came over her face. She gave the signal, and her Foot ninja stopped, standing away.

"Raphael-kun," she said pleasantly. "I know you were not so impolite as to break into my headquarters without showing deference to your *o-nii-san* . Where is he?"

Raph spoke under his breath to Leo. "Don't even *think* about it."

"I'm giving the orders here, Raph—if I have to interfere, I will."

Leonardo watched through Raphael's eyes as Karai raised her tanto, grabbing Lizzie's arm.

"We made an honorable exchange—yours and your younger brother's lives for this child. Have you come to recant on our bargain? That would render your life forfeit."

"You forced my brother int' that deal an' there was nothin' *honorable* 'bout it. An' your stinkin' honor ain't no excuse for torturin' a ten-year-old, Karai."

"I will thank you not to teach *me* in the ways of honor, Raphael-chan."

Raph showed no reaction, but Leo winced. It ground at him, for once his knowledge and experience with another language working entirely against him.

"So…" Karai went on, almost quiet—she had Lizzie in a tight, clawed grip. "Leonardo-san wishes to go back on our deal and lay down his honor, does he?" She looked around at the room, scanning the shadows. "Hamato Leonardo-san! Show yourself—do not sink so low as to send your armored *otouto-chan* to speak to me in your stead, like a coward!"

Here Raphael began to lose that rhythmic peace he had attained. "Don't think you c'n lecture anyone in my family 'bout honor, when you been poisonin' your weapons, forcin' us t' play your sick games and run yer gambits and make deals with ya, interrogatin' a kid by usin' her *dead mom* against her—you're just a sick, evil whack-bag an' yer no better'n the Shredder—though I guess I should expect"—

Raphael threw himself down into a crouch, allowing the bulky armor covering his shoulders and shell to absorb the dozens of shuriken that suddenly came flying, in a chill rain, in his direction. He was laughing.

"Raph!" Leo hissed into his headset. "I'm… I'm coming down there"—

"Don't, Fearless. She's jus' tryin' to get your panties in a bunch with all that honor bullshit. Bitch doesn't like hearin' the truth, ya notice?"

"You're not gonna be laughing when that mouth of yours gets you run-through with her tanto, Raphael!"

Raphael laughed. "She's not a good person, bro. She'd run me through either way—might's well tell 'er what's on my mind and remember t' keep my sai up, huh?"

Karai, however, held up a hand stiffly. "You bring dishonor on your family. I have tried to keep my dealings with you as honorable as possible—I am sorry I have had to transgress, but my father is more important to me than life itself. I would expect you to understand this."

"Yeah—thing is, *my* father would never want to come back t' life at the expense of someone else's family, not t' mention *two* . Ya destroyed Lizzie's family an' you've done a lot t' put mine at risk. This thing you call honor doesn't inspire much faith in me. You try an' get us to work with etiquette—what, you offer tea an' that somehow makes up for th' fact you almost *kill* us? What kinda twisted polite

society d'you come from? It looks like honor… but it's jus' freakin' *wrong* ."

Karai's eyes darkened. "Your brother has one minute to appear, Raphael."

"Don't, Leo. I've only got about twenty disarmed an' we know she ain't beyond killin' us. She ain't like you."

Leo made a swift move, then looked up in surprise, when Don's arm stopped him. "He said no, Leo. And he's right—you're extremely vulnerable, and if you go down there, you'll only put him in more danger. He'll protect you."

"Damn straight I will," Raph grumbled, not noticing the layer to his brother's words, as he couldn't see Donatello's face.

Michelangelo was gazing down at him from above, a strange, small smile lighting up his face in small increments.

Karai made a small chopping gesture, and her soldiers advanced once again. "Kill him."

"Jus' the kinda talk I like t' hear," Raph whispered, and sent his *manriki* whirling again in a tornado of death.

Leo swallowed. "Raph—disarm as many as possible, especially throwing weapons. Knock the best fighters unconscious if you can—then draw Karai down from the loft. One of us will grab Lizzie and the rest will cover you. We'll leave through the vents, understand?"

"Got ya, Fearless. I got some ass t' kick now, if ya don't mind."

The Foot threw their numbers at him, though he thankfully had the greatest range, and controlled his close combat to what he could handle, spinning around and around before hooking one soldier who was giving him problems, bringing him close, and using the chains or a hidden sai to send their weapon shooting away, aiming for areas

near the ventilation, where Donnie could collect them and hide the deadly tools from their users.

Mikey seemed almost dazed, but his eyes were narrowed, discerning—he never responded when Leo and Donnie addressed him, but at last he spoke, in a quiet, strange voice, into his headset.

"Hey, Raph. Can I ask you a question?"

"That was a question. But you c'n ask 'nother one, I guess," Raph mumbled, again whirling and sunk into the rhythm.

"You never told me your favorite movie. The one you watch with Casey."

Don and Leo both sent their younger brother odd looks, reproving and curious. Raphael laughed.

"You couldn't choose a better time?"

Mikey shrugged. "She told 'em to kill you. Seemed like the thing t' ask, dude."

Silence, on Raphael's end. They expected him to deny that anyone could kill him, a denial of his own mortality. Instead, after a long deliberation, he spoke.

" *The Boondock Saints* . Master Splinter wouldn't approve a' th' language an' th' vigilante stuff, but Casey had me watch it at his place, before he 'n April moved in together."

Mikey blinked. "Really? That's… um… weird. I totally had you pegged for *Fight Club* , if I had t' guess."

Raph chuckled, then punched a Foot ninja, drop kicked another, and returned to swinging his chains. "Yeah, read the book. No fun t' watch when ya know the big secret 'n everything. April loves it… Brad Pitt'n all."

Mikey grinned; his voice still sounded strange, but he hadn't smiled properly in a while. Silently, Leo reached down and turned off his radio—he could still see what Raph saw and could still speak in to warn him, but couldn't hear Raphael. Wordlessly, Don did the same, both warily watching as Mikey began pacing—no longer watching from above, but the view inside the helmet. His eyes had taken on a bizarre blue fire.

"How come *The Boondock Saints* ? I only read about it, like, in magazines, ya know?"

Raph sighed. "It's, uh… about these two Irish brothers. They take out some Mob guys cuz they're tryin' t' take down a friend's bar all violent, then come t' get revenge, an' they're startin' out jus' protectin' each other. Then they wind up with th' guys' pager, an' find out where a buncha bosses'll be, so they decide t' take 'em out. This investigator from the FBI knows 'em an' puts together all their vigilante stunts an' in the end, he's sorta obsessed. So he decides t' help 'em… it works cuz they're brothers, though. He believes they're… ya know… good guys. In the end they ask a buncha people on the streets what they think, an' a lot've 'em aren't mad, they jus' don't care… won't comment. Says a lot 'bout the world."

Lizzie, above, watching Raph whirl, curling the chain around the Foot soldier's necks and sending them flying away, fragile bodies breaking and bruising and bleeding. Mikey's eyes clouded, on fire, deep and bright and dark. His brothers watching, disturbed and wondering and apprehensive and waiting.

"How 'bout your favorite song?"

Raph grunted, sending a soldier flying. "For what? Songs serve a purpose, y'know."

Mikey blinked. "Umm… y'know. Trainin'? Calming your mind and all that Leo kinda stuff."

Raphael laughed. "Korn. Twisted Transistor. Next?"

"No." Mikey's voice was lower, somehow dark. "Why?"

Raph made a slightly frustrated noise, and ducked as a *bisento* swung over him. "You're freakin' ridiculous—ya know that, Mike? It's jus'… I dunno, got th' right beat, I guess."

The strange voice, from his little brother.

"Tell me."

"I, uh…" Raph took a deep breath; when he spoke again, it was a beat, no melody or song, but a rhythmic poem, whirling and pulling his enemies close with every bass hit down at the bottom of his throat. " *Hey you, hey you, finally you get it—the world, ain't fair, eat you if you let it—and as your tears fall on your breast, your dress, vibrations coming through, you're in, a mess—a lonely life, where no one understands you, but don't, give up, because the music do* ." It was a whisper, a beat, held in tune with swinging chains and the odd scream, and Raphael's eyes watched Mikey in the reflection, earnestly, trying to make him understand. His voice caught, bringing an enemy closer; Mikey's eyes narrowed, looking through the visor of the Nightwatcher's helmet at this unwilling victim, chains wrapped around his neck—expressionless face, masked and soulless. He saw the weapon, the purple edge, and a strange truth began to creep along his spine. This person would gladly kill his brother unless he knew no mercy awaited him if he failed, on either end. From his master and his intended mark.

This threat—the fear of beings and shadows like the Nightwatcher, ghosts at the edge of society, wasn't there to keep good people safe in the darkness. It was to remind good people that righteousness and evil are beyond law and the police, something intangible at the fringes of sight, watching and unpredictable and alien, blind and insane and beyond reason and truly, honestly, a force to be reckoned with.

Raphael was a force. Mikey knew this force like the back of his hand all its peculiarities. He wanted to know the person, buried,

subjugated, prone and struggling, beneath that force.

Mikey paced faster. "You havta have a favorite song, for whatever reason, Raph."

When Raphael spoke again, his voice too was strange—strained and full of tension. "I like one cuz of th' sound an' the music video together. Got it stuck in my head, like a movie, every time I hear it, ya know? It's 'Falling Away from Me', on that CD ya made, 'member? This… kid, little girl, like twelve 'r thirteen… she's got this box. An' her dad beats her, but th' box has the band in it, an' she's listenin', an' this… I dunno, red light, tells all th' other kids she's in trouble. Her dad's comin' t' beat her again, but then there's all these… kids, y'know, outside her window, cheerin' for her t' the beat, and she gets out through the window. An' she doesn't look back. Saved by the music, and all these other kids. Somethin' I feel like I know. All these people, shoutin' somethin'—an' I know what it is, everywhere. Y'know?" He sounded at once sure and confused.

Michelangelo's eyes seemed somehow lost; he was pacing faster now in the metal vent, his face inside the helmet, almost, the very beat… he could almost hear the song, was almost there—

"Tell me the lyrics. Tell me."

Raphael was lost and resigned to it. "I— *I'm feeling tired, my time is gone today—you threaten suicide—sometimes, that's okay—do what others say—I'm here, standing hollow—falling—away from me. Falling—away from me* ."

Now Mikey knew where he was. He had been here before, swum this whirlpool. His lips followed, his feet fell into the rhythm, his eyes fell closed, standing inside his brother's eyes, as he set Foot ninjas flying, punks and mobsters and gangsters and monsters.

" *Day, is here fading—that's when, I would say—I flirted with suicide —sometimes, kill the pain—I can always say: 'It's gonna be better tomorrow'—Falling—away from me—Falling—away from me* ."

Together now.

Mikey didn't know he was smiling; didn't know the smile was honest, and his heart was alive, no longer full of ignorant joy and cruel abandon, but something deeper.

Falling, away from me.

It's spinning round and round.

Lost in the beat, saved by the music, anger melting to something new. The world, between jail bars, another truth.

Falling away, from me…

It's nothing can be found.

Mikey found his gaze opening again, a new tunnel around him. He found his head turning, until Leonardo filled his sight. He could hear the music in his head. He knew this song. Raphael played it everyday, waiting for him to understand.

Falling away, from me…

It's spinning round and round.

And that singular madness, that hot and cold, the frightening unpredictability that set them all on edge, sprouting from some insidious root.

Falling away, from me…

Slow it down .

Yes, it was stupid and childish. Yes, they never spoke. Yes, if he could have it any other way—if he knew any other way—Mikey would do it. He wanted his brother, wanted to feel his mind and understand that beating, living mass, the rhythm of his heart, so opaque.

Leo watched as Mikey's strange and dangerous gaze fell on him, discerning and disturbing. His youngest brother's eyes still rested on him when he spoke into his headset.

"Keep going, Raph."

"Mikey"—Raphael was slightly out of breath, the Foot running quicker gambits around him; endless, the groups arriving, all poisoned and aiming for his legs where no metal protected him —"why're ya doin' this? You know me, bro. I mean…"

"Why d'you like that CD so much?" Mikey asked, quieter.

"You—ya made it for me when I was like, fourteen. I jus'… it was jus' the right time. You know?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I know…"

The time when the beat of music and lyrics and movies, anything that gives a wider look into the world, takes on an indecent importance, but it was something—some way of understanding each other, some medium, a go-between. Stupid and silly and immature—and there should be more wholesome things in the universe; but if their family connected over pizza rather than over salad, there should be no reason why opera would be a better stand-in.

Mikey swallowed. "There's one I don't get—the one you play sometimes when you, like, train alone"—

"'Make Me Bad'…" Raph chuckled. "That one's dumb. Gets' ya movin' though, ya know? Helps get the blood pumpin'. Crazy ass music video—Don would dig it, actually—all sci-fi an' shit. They're developin' these alien bugs in these guys on 'nother planet; like one a' your late night killer thrillers, Mike. It goes, uh… shit… *I feel the reason, as it's leaving me—no, not again—it's quite deceiving, as I'm feeling, the flesh make me bad* . That's the best part."

Yes, Mikey knew that one too. He had gotten Raph into Korn because he knew the band like the back of his hand; it was something they could have in common, but none of the music Mikey listened to had the same gravity of meaning. He had seen a lot in his lifetime, but none of it gave him nightmares—nothing bands like Korn said had any meaning.

Until he got in front of a punching bag. Until someone threw his brother through a skylight, or destroyed their home. Until his hero disappeared, spiriting his brother away with him. Until Leo vanished, and they thought he was dead. Until he was a clown, getting beaten down by children, laughed at, until he saw the world in all its soccer mom glory, until there were kids who had paid-for affection, until he tried to see the street detritus through his brother's eyes and found he couldn't. Until he realized he didn't have a shared experience with the closest people in the world to him, that they perceived entirely differently, all for something he must have missed. Until he stood in the training room, and knew his smile wasn't real anymore. Until it was nothing but a mask of expectation. Until those songs began to mean something to him as well, that he didn't want to admit.

Until Michelangelo knew he was changing.

Below him—drop-kick, rabbit punch, mule kick, dragon punch, back flip, dodge, out with the sai, bring one close and bury the small blade in a leg, depositing the wounded soldier and tossing his weapons in Donatello's direction for collection, and whirl again, one more time. Raphael was the sound. It was the sound of his heart and the rhythm of his breathing beneath his metal mantle, because he was almost seventeen and immortal and the Nightwatcher.

"Raph"—

"It's okay, Mike. I, uh… I get it. I'm a kid brother too, 'member?"

The first group of Foot dropped back, leaving another in their stead, several of whom wielded wooden weapons and heavy *bisento* — they were a heavy, bashing group with big torsos and arms—a fitting

match to drag their armored adversary down by sheer brute force. Raph's *manriki* couldn't pull them forward anymore with the effortlessness of rag dolls. Karai chuckled from her perch, as a bo caught Raph in the throat, disintegrating his voice. Leo and Don turned their sound radios back on just in time to hear Raphael gasping, trying to stay on his feet.

"Your rescue effort has been in vain, Raphael. You would do best to leave now with your life before my ninja take it from you."

"Oh, yeah? An' what happened to honor, huh? Not so high n' mighty now."

Karai shook her head, majestically. "Ninjitsu is the way of the assassin, Raphael-kun. It is a way to kill. I have tried to treat your family with deference, but if you cannot show me so much respect as to send your oldest in announced to speak to me like a civilized adult, I cannot be held responsible for your death. You are the trespasser here, and I the trespassed. You know nothing about this child, or what I plan to do with her. Moreover, you know nothing about her mother. Leave, now. Before your family too must deal with a horrible death."

Leo and Donnie exchanged glances; Mikey rushed to the opening, to look down at his older brother again, surrounded and outnumbered.

"How're our numbers, Donnie?" Raph asked from below, in an undertone.

"Roughly 85 percent of the poisoned weapons are out of Foot hands by now—from what I could see. There is always the possibility of another 20 percent of that number concealed on the soldiers, judging from their body mass. And there's still a clear 15 percent they still have out in the open—including those *bisento* and the shuriken belts. Most of the soldiers you're fighting are using wood-based weapons—you can use your sai for close-range on most of them and be done in a couple minutes. Leo?"

Leonardo swallowed, chewing Karai's words over. "She has a point, Raph."

"You gotta be kiddin' me," Raph said; in the view screen he sent to Leo, Lizzie struggling and trying get around to punch Karai in the stomach came in clearly. "Leo—Liz is *right there* . We're so close."

"We're closer to you getting killed than saving Liz, I hope you realize."

"It's…" Raph almost said *my life* , but Mikey's voice stuck in his mind. *Your life belongs to us.* "Alright, bro. What're your orders?"

Leo warmed, tried to conceal his smile. "Stick with the plan, for now. Donnie seems to think we're doing well, and I'm inclined to agree. But you stay close to the opening, in case I need you to retreat—okay?"

"Loud 'n clear, big brother. Hey, Mikey—you count th' jerks as I KO the shit outta 'em, 'kay?"

"Bomb-diggity, big guy." Mikey's smile was sad, but real. Raphael went to work again, not bothering to respond to Karai with anything but a whack to the nearest soldier's head, clunking him swiftly with his *manriki* 's heavy weights. The Foot watched him fall peacefully to the ground with a *thud* , before charging forward with a vengeance, making Raphael laugh; he drew his sai and uppercut the next one in a smooth arc.

Donnie had been right; it was over in a few short minutes, ending with an amused, slightly out-of-breath Raphael standing in the middle of quite a few "KO"ed (Mikey counted 22) bodies, most of them felled by a chain weight or the butt of his sai—or, when need arose, one of the many very hard surfaces protecting his arms and shins. Raph resumed a wary, ready stance, waiting out another group, but this stayed back, as though waiting for Karai; the last group wielded nothing but *bisentos* .

"Those guys are 10 percent, Raph," Donnie said, grinning. "Draw Karai down here and we'll grab Liz—I can't see any one of them trying chuck a *bisento* twenty feet up and hitting with any accuracy."

Karai, however, was doing the job for them; she had called another aide, who grabbed Liz from her, before she strode down the stairs from the loft level, her hooded cloak fluttering ominously, tanto drawn.

"Hamato Leonardo-san—there is respect between our families. Show yourself and fight me and I shall spare Raphael."

This time Raph didn't have to say anything; Don and Mikey both put out a hand to restrain their leader, and remind him—they were winning. But Karai was coming closer; she had the appearance of intent.

"Raphael uses the sai," Donnie said, gently. "He has an automatic advantage against a single blade, as he's a double-wielder, and he's armored. He might not win, but he won't get skewered, either."

Leo spoke into his headset. "Didn't you say you had a bad feeling? Well I do too, Raph. Watch your back here. I'll stay and keep an eye, while they grab Lizzie." He used this as an indirect order to Don, who matched his gaze and nodded. Mikey lingered, though, looking through the aperture at Raphael.

"But—but what if"—

" *Now* , Mikey," Donnie said sternly. "We gotta get Liz outta here, then Raph can retreat. He's the one drawing all their attention. Leo—I'm leaving my duffel bag with the first aid and explosives—in case you have to get him out of here."

Karai was smiling, in Raphael's line of sight, coming closer.

"She knows he's the decoy," Leo said, staring down. "That's how she knows I'm here."

The only person he was speaking to now, however, was Raphael, as Donnie had already led Michelangelo away.

A Foot ninja near Raphael spoke, at a small nod from his master—a masked, faceless face, to match his opponent.

"You will show respect to Mistress Karai and bow, creature."

"I don't *bow* t' murderers and kidnappers, buddy"—

"RAPH"—

It happened too fast, faster than Leo could warn him, and certainly faster than Raphael could see. The large Foot ninja sprinted forward, and brought the staff of his heavy *bisento* crushing down on the metal plating protecting Raphael's shell, driving it inwards. Raph dropped his sai, letting them clatter from nerveless fingers, and fell to his knees. The only sound Leo heard was the crack—inorganic, unlike the last time—and Donnie came over the line, switching to Leo's channel.

"That was the cement setting cracking under the pressure—you better get him out and take the metal off his shell, and get the weight off his spinal cord. We'll grab Liz and meet you."

Leo gasped for breath, suddenly winded. "Yeah—yeah, okay."

He didn't think about the explosives; he leapt, almost toppled out of the vents to his brother's side, drew his swords, and turned just in time to receive Karai's tanto between his *ninjaken* .

"You are quite predictable—you should have faced me before he was injured."

Leo shut his mouth tight—the very idea of speaking to her now was filthy. And yet he couldn't shake off the feeling; how far would he go to save a brother or his father—how filthy would be make himself, to bring them back from the dead? His honor was strong, while he had

his family… yet he had seen his own darkness before, seen it reflected in betrayed eyes, had felt the dirt between his hands, and wallowed in it like a fountain of sunlit honey. He craved the filth and gloried when his brother made himself filthier.

He wanted to kill her, peel the skin off her face and stick his fingers between her muscles, until he found her brain tissues. He wanted to find the filth there, and burn it away, as he could not from off himself.

Leo engaged in combat, and the world vanished. There was another Raphael in his mind, and he wandered further and further from the real one—lunging, and parrying, and sinking into battle.

Michelangelo never had to think about it. When the Foot raised his *bisento* again, Mikey leapt the twenty feet that would bring him to the floor, and did the one necessary thing to save his brother's life—he traded it for someone else's. It was not a philosophical moment; he could hear Raphael's pained gasps in his head, see the world through his eyes, and his fallen weapons on the ground—he could feel the helplessness discharging his muscles and nerves, so he leapt down, grabbed that weapon, ad drove it, hard and true, through the Foot ninja's heart. The warm blood sickened him, and he let the suddenly heavy body drop, before more could run down his arm—he grabbed the *manriki* and took Raphael's place, chains and nunchaku, spinning in tandem, the whir of death. When the group turned to run in a terror he didn't understand, Mikey took the pursuit, deaf to the feral scream ripping out of his throat.

Only Donatello stuck to the plan, watching, wide-eyed, as his younger brother joined the ranks of killers, before turning to Liz, depositing the stunned body of the aide at their feet.

"Donnie!" she asked, surprised; she was pale, disoriented, gazing between him and the chaos on the warehouse floor.

"Y-yeah. C'mon. We gotta get outta here." He nodded back at the vent.

"But—Raphi? Mikey and Leo and"—

"We're no use to them captured. Besides—you're what Karai wants, not my brothers. Let's go."

Lizzie bit her lip before, stone-faced, she saluted, and followed him up to the vent, with another look at her rescuers below—both half-mad, in pain, lost innocence. They were different from the last time she'd seen them; then her mother popped up before her vision, worms for eyes, and Donnie threw her in to safety.

"DONNIE!"

He kept the creature at bay with his bo, refusing to be the hero, retreating from it to a safe distance and joining the little girl in the vents.

"That thing is *really* after you," Don gasped, as he slammed the vent closed behind him, listening to it's inhuman wails and howls. Lizzie watched it, silent and stolid. At last she spoke, in that quiet, strange voice Donnie had come to expect from her.

"She's my mom… but everything's starting to break down. She's confused. Can't even see anymore."

He gazed at her for a minute, then at his video feed. It had gone dark; the Nightwatcher helmet was out. He couldn't hear Raph anymore in his headset. He changed to Leo's channel, heard voices garbled before the channel went dark; Mikey's too was silent.

"They've been captured. I'll check the blueprints on my PDA for likely prison areas," Donnie said, eyeing her. "Then, well… we'll cause some havoc and get my brothers out of here."

Lizzie gave him a rare smile and a thumbs up, before they crawled off into darkness.

Michelangelo awoke to a metal cell. Alone.

His body was lit up like a Japanese lantern, moist and slippery and on fire with pain. For a moment his mind was dark.

Then he gazed at his arms.

He was no longer green, so thick was his skin caked with blood, black and red and brown, slick and dried and cracking, flaking off here and there, sticky as molasses in others. He felt bruised and soft, but not light-headed. This was blood from someone else.

Several someone elses, in fact. He found once-living flesh under his fingernails, turning dark as it died and rotted. He smelled like a dead body. Maybe this was Hell, or the afterlife, or the inside of a tomb.

But that would be easy.

Michelangelo heard shouting inside of his brain, and instinctively curled into a tighter ball, his shell against the hard surface behind him.

The shouting could be him; but another him, from another dimension, perhaps from a comic book or a movie. It couldn't be real.

He smelled like Death, and yet he wasn't dead. He was caked with blood that wasn't his. He was alone. In this cold, metallic hell.

Michelangelo wanted his brother. He had killed for him. And now he was by himself, in the soundless dark. Without even a demon to keep him company.

He was young, and alone, and scared. So he knelt his head against the wall.

Soon he began to hear voices, garbled and muffled. He didn't cry out —his voice seemed to have been eaten by maggots. It was enough that he could hear the sound, the beat and rhythm of them, not far

away. On the other side of a metal curtain. As though nothing in his life had ever changed.

Leo awoke to a pounding headache and the sound of Raphael's labored breathing; he cracked his eyes open, to find a metal floor beneath him, and their faces close, lying side-by-side.

"R-Raph?" he asked tentatively.

Raph was on his plastron, breathing hard; there was a massive dent driving the back panel of his armor down; his helmet was gone, but otherwise he seemed unmolested.

"Leo… can't feel m' fingers…" gasped, eyes still closed. "Think Donnie's setting cracked 'r somethin'… feels like somethin's sittin' on me…"

Leo grit his teeth. "We've gotta get the armor off you, take the pressure off as much as we can." He gazed around—they had been deposited in a metal cell, Donnie's open duffle bag beside them. The explosives were gone, but, amazingly, the first aid kit remained, left there for them by Karai. Their weapons were gone. "What… what happened?"

"You kinda went postal on Karai. 'was pretty awesome, actually…" Raph muttered, smiling, without opening his eyes. Leo turned him on his side, unhooking the straps keeping the mantle on him. "Then Mikey jumped down and the place went nuts… 'e… 'e killed a couple, I think… with my sai. Ran after 'em… not sure if they got 'im 'r not. 'nyways, I was still pretty useless after Karai an' one a' her goons knocked ya out… so I played possum 'til they chucked us both in here. Seems Don got away with Lizzie… we're collateral."

Leo pulled the heavy armor mantle off his brother's shoulders, taking some pressure off the plate; Raphael opened his eyes, cringing.

"Feels like I just dropped a hundred pounds… Hurts like hell, though…"

Leo smiled, putting the armor aside. "Donnie brought your pain killers along. How thoughtful of him."

Raph grinned, only slightly. "Jus'… jus' one. I hate those damn things."

"Are you crazy?" Leo asked, depositing three into the palm of his hand. "What's the point of taking one? You've got a collapsed shell."

"Don… gives me one… all th' time…" Raph said, closing his eyes again.

"He's catering to your machismo," Leo half-scolded, looking at the label. "It's two for normal people—and you're bigger than most. Take your medicine."

Raph grudgingly swallowed, taking limited time to unclench his teeth. Leo lifted the armor plating off his brother's shell, and looked at the damage—Donatello, once again, had been right. The cement had crack and the setting jutted inward, most likely putting pressure on the spine.

"Wiggle your fingers," Leo ordered quietly. Raph did so, slowly. "Okay… you can move them—that's a good sign, I'm thinking."

"I dunno if I wanna be playin' doctor with you, big bro…" Raph mumbled, half-smiling. Leo ignored him, and helped his brother out of the rest of the suit, packing it into the duffle bag. "Let's get you into some kind of comfortable position…"

The crack was on the upper curve of Raph's shell; Leo lifted his brother's head and leaned it against his plastron, and used his folded legs to brace the bottom of Raph's carapace, so no pressure would be on the crack, while gravity would still be moving the crack back outwards.

"Now what?" Raph asked, his eyes closed.

Leo put his arms around Raph's shoulders, resting his hands lightly on Raph's plastron.

"Now… we wait."

Salvation

Author's Note: I told you I would bring the Interludes and the normal chapters together, and I have. Hopefully that will help explain the length of this bit; it is essentially a hybrid chap. Songs referenced are Korn's "Make Me Bad" and "Coming Undone," both available on Youtube. In addition, this chapter has an alternate that I have posted in another location; it's alternate was the original idea which I eventually decided against. I feel, while this bit deals with the issues I have raised, it is not as organic an apex to Leo's insanity as the first idea. Hopefully my die-hard readers will understand when they see both versions. The next chapter will be up in a few days. Enjoy—and remember, I am being experimental here, so feedback is GREATLY appreciated.

Alternate located on my homepage under Chapter 15: Damnation (as opposed to Salvation). If you are coming from this site, please leave your reviews under Chapter 15 here at The alternate is rated NC-17 for a non-consensual adult situation and disturbing themes. It is the beginning of a branchaway version of Walking the Line to be found on my blog, if you care to read it.

" *Incest is, in some ways, the complete failure to look outside the self."* —John Milton Lecture Series, UCLA, Spring 2007

" *Raphi, stop sucking on your hand like that. Master Splinter says you're getting too old for that stuff."*

" *How come? S'not his hand."*

Rhetorical question.

If Leo were trapped in a burning building or some sadistic, twisted villain had given him a choice, which one of his brothers would he save?

Of course, there was a vast difference between what Leo said with his mouth and what he said with his heart. Out loud, his answers would verge along the lines of:

"Oh, I don't know. They're my little brothers. I don't think I could choose."

Or in the case of the burning building, "I guess whichever I was standing nearest to. I'd just grab them."

Many people don't know their answers to these kinds of rhetorical questions because, for one, they don't think they will ever be in such a situation, and two, they're probably right.

Not so for the realities of Leo's life. But what was scary to him was that he knew the answer—knew it like he knew his skin was green and his eyes brown.

All of his brothers had in some way reached out to humans; Raph and Mikey especially, who had little trouble befriending people; Don to a lesser extent, but who still admired some of the humans they met and worked closely with them; but then, Don never appeared to feel anything strongly. Leo? April was family to him. The only people he had ever loved were his family. And there was only one person he had ever loved as anything other than family.

" *Raphi—don't pick it up, it'll bite you!"*

" *Not scared."*

" *I'm not kidding with you—it looks rabid."*

" *So? It's stuck."*

" *I said get away from it, Raphael"—*

" *Stop telling me what to do, Leo!"*

" *It's for your own stupid good! You don't have to always be such a baby about it!"*

He also supposed it was easier as one climbed down the list from oldest to youngest. Donnie would know better than to try saving Leo; he would go towards one of his little brothers, most likely Mikey. He would probably trust Raph and Leo to get their shells out of dodge—and the same applied to Mikey, for that matter. And Raph—he guessed Raph would save his little brother. He only had one, after all. Some very dark and unacknowledged place in Leo prayed Raph would choose otherwise… or consider otherwise, if only for a second. He would never let Raph follow through with it. But if Leo had to die after such a choice, that dark part of him wanted to go out cradling such a thought.

" *Raphi, what're you doing? It's one in the morning."*

" *I don't like it so close to the ceiling… I miss our old bed."*

" *Raphi, we're all too big to share a bed anymore. And Mikey kicks, remember?"*

" *I don't care, it's better than this."*

" *What's the matter, Raphi—you scared?"*

" *I… I just miss our old bed."*

" *Alright… c'mon. Just… just tonight, okay?"*

" *Thanks, Leo… You… you miss it as much as I do, huh?"*

" *It doesn't matter."*

And as for himself, he shouldn't know the answer—know it like it was reality. He was their big brother, and practically a second parent. Donnie had always sought his advice, Mikey his attention, and Raph needed his guidance. When they were hurt as children, Leo would help patch them up. He was the first to learn to scavenge with

Master Splinter at a young age, and then teach Raph. His ridiculous younger brothers… Mikey always scraping this knee or elbow on his skateboard, Raphi always crying and in need of supervision when he tried to wander off, because their father sensed his rather difficult propensities. Leo hated that crying, but wasn't wise enough as a kid to fix the source. He'd bully Raphael into stopping, until Raph learned to not cry in front of him. Raph learned how not to upset him. Worked to stand next to him, with those wide, secretly admiring burnt caramel eyes. When Raph opened up, showed the being past that opaque, somehow crazy barrier, Leo found someone he liked.

" *Leo?"*

" *Hmmm? Raphi, go to sleep. It's two."*

" *What's seppuku?"*

" *Wh—huh?"*

" *Master Splinter said it to you earlier, when you were talking about Bushido."*

" *Didn't know you were in the room."*

" *Jay's cage is in there. I had to feed him."*

" *How's his wing?"*

" *Better. When the feathers grow back, I can let him go fly again… Hey, what's seppuku, Leo?"*

" *Not sure I should tell you."*

" *Aw, c'mon, Leo—I don't get scared like Mikey, and I won't go off and read a buncha books on it like Don and get you in trouble. What is it?"*

" *You always get ideas stuck in your head, and then you won't talk about it. I don't think so."*

" *I'm not some little kid, y'know."*

" *You start crying again and you will be."*

" *I'm…I'm not stupid. I'll figure it out on my own."*

" *Ugh, you're such a… It's suicide, okay? Happy now? Stop crying."*

" *I'm NOT crying! Bushido has… suicide?"*

" *Not in this family. I asked Master Splinter about it after reading it in one of his books. He forbids it, though."*

" *That's dumb. Nobody can tell you not to kill yourself."*

" *Huh. I can tell you. Don't ever do seppuku, Raphi."*

" *Why?"*

" *B-because… because I said so."*

When he had known Raph, as no one ever had or ever would, he had put Raphael in a category where brothers shouldn't be—not when you're a big brother, and a leader… not when you're *o-nii-san* . Old patterns die hard. He could always find ways of subtly bullying Raphael into doing what he was supposed to, but Raph could manipulate back; he could get under Leo's skin and challenge him and anger him and shatter every layer of calm so carefully constructed, or in younger years threaten an outburst and make Leo back down. It was their fault for thinking Raph was either sick or simple; he was neither. He was content to be thought these things if he could be secretly who he was and hold himself away from the ones who wanted to know that person—and this brave, smart and independent individual sparked something in Leo, when Raph let him see it, so brightly and gladly, out in another world.

" *D'you really think I'm dumb, Leo?"*

" *No, Raphi. You're smart."*

" *Not like you or Donnie."*

" *Me and Donnie are… intelligent. You're smart. There's a difference."*

" *What difference? Smart, intelligent, stupid, simple. Just a buncha words. They don't say nothin'."*

" *I don't know… like that, I guess. The way you know they're words."*

" *That's dumb, Leo—of course they're words."*

" *Fine, you're stupid then."*

" *You're a bossy jerk."*

" *Crybaby."*

" *Daddy's boy."*

" *Nutcase."*

" *Yeah, right. It's getting late. Aren't you gonna say we should get home soon?"*

" *I guess we could just live out here."*

" *Don't be dumb, Leo."*

" *Ha. What if I'd meant it?"*

Leo could never be interested in something without looking for its definitive truth—he was dogmatic, and driven, and when something fascinated him he would push and pull at it until he had all the answers—he worked at things obsessively, and strained for perfection. These feelings had been left without an absolution.

He knew precisely whom he would choose, if such a situation truly occurred; and worse still, his gut told him Donnie and Mikey would

understand the decision. There were emotions that could shatter even the best of leaders. He had a long life in front of him… he wanted to live long enough to look back on years of turmoil and power struggles and laugh. Though for this very reason it might have been better to let Raphael die—because Leo didn't know what he himself was waiting for. What he wanted. He was nearing seventeen and his and Raph's relationship seemed brotherly and trusting and far better than it had been in a long time. Yet Leo was waiting.

" *Raphi? Why d'you like listening to all those people talk? You don't even know them."*

" *You know that channel with all the static? It's like the sound it makes. If you listen long enough it starts to make sense."*

" *You listen to the white noise on the TV for that long? That's… that's really bad, Raphi."*

" *Why?"*

" *Does anyone know you do it?"*

" *Just you."*

" *Okay."*

" *I don't get it, Leo. It's really cool…"*

" *I believe you. Just make sure I'm the only one who knows, okay?"*

" *But… why?"*

" *They wouldn't understand."*

There was some deadly gravity down inside of him, magnetized in the wrong direction, like anti-matter. Repelled where he should attract. Attracted where he should be repelled. If he had not been instilled with the fear of it, he might even be doing it now. Simply

because he fought the magnetism didn't mean it had gone away… it just bided its time.

He touched his brother's pained, half-sleeping face.

"Raph? Is it feeling any better?"

"A little… startin' to back off some, I think." Raphael was cringing, though. "Still havin' trouble feelin' my fingers."

"Maybe I should talk—take your mind off it?"

Raph chuckled. "Do your worst, Fearless."

Leo was silent for a moment. "You know something, Raph? When I was sent away, I learned I was afraid of lots of stuff. And none of it was really out in the world of men."

Raph opened an eye. "Havta agree with ya, Leo. For once."

Leo smiled. "You've agreed with me a lot lately."

"Really? Cuz I was gettin' the feeling *you* were agreein' with me."

Leo sighed at this. "You've been growing up. I guess some part of me expected to come back and find someone completely different. But you were as contrary and pissed off at me as ever."

"Yeah? You were the same prideful Mr. Perfect, weren't ya?"

"I think everything about us changed a little… except the way we come at each other." Leo laughed. "Maybe that's the one thing that separating us couldn't really fix."

Raph scoffed weakly, eyes closed again. "Maybe why Master Splinter left like that… leave us to figure each other out. Now we got all that time apart behind us, y'know?" He groaned a bit, trying to suppress it. "Damn, this shit hurts like a mother"—

Leo placed a hand on either of Raph's shoulders, rubbing them gently.

"Leo? Wh-what're ya doin', bro?"

Leo didn't rise to it. "You're suffering and we're in a prison cell—it's the only thing I *can* do."

Raph smiled, his eyes remaining shut, while his brow unfurrowed slowly. "You never were mucha one for feelin' helpless."

"You've probably always known that—no reason to point it out."

"Maybe… maybe it's the pills…" Raph's brow furrowed again. "Think I took too many… feels weird… Don always gives me one…"

"You only ever let him give you one, and it doesn't seem to do much. You're pretty big, you know."

"Not… not used t' pills…" Raph's voice was starting to slur. "One goes 'long way…"

"I'm sorry, Raph," Leo whispered, feeling somehow light. *I must be grounded. I have to stay strong for him* . "I hate watching you suffer."

"S'okay… you got no control over it… s'gonna be fine, pretty soon. S'gonna be fine…"

Leo found himself massaging a little harder, mercifully thankful for the contact.

"It's so easy to take it all for granted, until you're out in the middle of nowhere, in some jungle you don't know anything about, and there's no one you can be close to… no one to so much as clap on the shoulder or punch on the arm. The only contact is through swift violence. You might as well not be a living thing."

Raph smiled vaguely. "It's so weird… grow up sharin' beds and crammed together in a tiny burrow in a sewer, 'n gotta stay close t'

stay warm… then gotta sleep in your own bunks 'n be careful not t' leave your hand on some'n's arm for too long… 'fore ya know it, might as well *all* be wearin' leather 'n armor 'n a mask…"

Leo blinked, surprised. "Maybe I did give you too many…"

Raph shook his head, swallowing. "No, s'okay. Needed… needed to say stuff… Wouldn't usually."

Something twisted Leo's stomach violently; it was that feeling right when Raph had stood up, splattered by rain, turned away from him, the person under the vigilante. Horror… sickness… shock… excitement. Something shaking inside him, ready to go and have it out—to hear everything, and finally get some answers—to see behind that damn curtain his brother erected against him, to see the consuming fire again, and be swallowed whole, even if he saw more hate there than love.

"Raph… what were those lyrics Mikey was asking you about? The ones he didn't get?"

"Just a stupid song, Leo… by this band 'e got me into, when I was fourteen 'r somethin'…"

"But they mean something to you."

"It's… it's more the beat…" Raph's left hand slowly tapped the floor, steadily. " *'I… feel the reason… as it's leaving me—no, not again… It's… quite deceiving as I'm… feeling the flesh… make me bad'…* More the beat… somethin'…"

Leo found himself slowly passing a hand over the slash marks on his brother's face; after his fingers drifted over, he saw Raphael's eyes open and looking into his.

"It's… somethin'… somethin' 'bout the sound savin' people… like th' guys rappin' on corners 'r the guy playing 'is guitar so 'e can eat… kids tappin'… those teenagers 'oo sing 'n play th' harmonica 'r

whatever… jus'… jus'… findin' some way a' tellin' what they've seen 'r done 'r lived through… this beat goin' through the city wi' th' subway 'n the cars 'n the sirens and… I dunno… savin' people somehow. Not so diff'rent from us…"

Leo studied his brother, hands lying unmoving on his shoulders. "You're amazing, you know? I don't know why you hide it from us all the time."

Raph slowly closed his eyes. "'m th' muscle… 's you guys' job t' be amazin' 'n stuff…"

Leo gently stroked the cool skin with his thumbs. "You're the muscle, just not the kind of muscle you think, Raph… there's nothing more important than the heart…"

Raph chuckled unexpectedly, sounding slightly delirious. "'r so corny, bro… s'why… s'why I love you…"

The world span under Raphael; dimly he heard himself speak, and opened his eyes, reminded of his brother's presence by warm hands on his shoulders. Then there was wetness on his cheeks, rolling down. He squinted up at Leo, vision pulsating.

"Leo… are you cryin' 'r am I?"

Leo shook his head, placing a hand over his eyes, but felt a weak grip take his wrist. "Four years… I was gone for one… but… you were gone for four… Can you blame me for trying to get even with you a little?"

"'m right here…feels like 'm flyin'… like ridin' th' bike through the city, no worries… jus' disappears'n th' sound…"

" *Hey, bro… how's it goin', this whole pilgrimage kick?"*

" *Go away… you're not real."*

" *Oh ho, thought I was the cynic."*

" *Raph wouldn't be caught dead in a jungle."*

" *Oh, yeah? Look at me. I'm right here."*

" *I'm hallucinating. I haven't eaten in three days… Just go away. This is hard enough without you gloating."*

" *Not here to gloat. Jus' wonderin' why you ain't written me, is all."*

" *I wrote Master Splinter three months ago. I'm sure he passed on my message."*

" *Stay out of trouble? Yeah. Thanks, bro. You tell the sky not to be blue?"*

" *If I write to you I have to write to Don and Mikey, as well."*

" *They're fine. Don's got everything under control 'n Mikey's always got his chipper attitude. I'm the one who thinks you're dead."*

" *You… you think I'm dead?"*

" *Why else would you forget about me?"*

" *You… you forgot me first."*

" *Then why'm I here, bro?"*

" *Because… because you're a product of my mind. I want you to be here."*

" *Then why're you tellin' me t' leave?"*

" *Because I want this to be real."*

" *Then come home."*

" *You'll just hate me when I get there."*

" *Right—and stayin' away longer's gonna help that?"*

" *You'd hate the silence out here…"*

" *I'd like the stars. Never clear like this in the city."*

" *You know Master Splinter would never send you alone, right?"*

" *I'm not stupid, Leo."*

" *I know. Kimi… kimi ni ai suru, little brother."*

" *I know."*

"Flying… yeah, I know what you mean…" Leo mumbled. "I fasted sometimes, in Mongolia and Costa Rica, and before I met with the tribunal in Japan… like flying."

"Japan… you go t' Tokyo?"

Leo chuckled, tears still trickling out of his eyes. "Plane landed there… your kinda town, Raphi. Fulla freaks."

Raphael wasn't smiling. "Seriously."

"It… it was Spring when I got there. I thought there'd be blooming trees everywhere, but Tokyo's a concrete jungle, really. I kinda missed New York, so I climbed up Tokyo Tower and sat there, with the whole city lit up at my feet. It… it was so beautiful… Probably one of the most beautiful things I saw on my journey, in its own strange way."

The corners of Raphael's mouth went up. "I… wish I coulda… been there with you…"

"Raph… *Anata wa datta* ."

You were.

Leo heard it somewhat late, *anata* instead of *kimi* . Raph opened his eyes, frowning.

"…think I used't' fly once…"

"Raph… can you… can you feel your fingers?"

"No… 's okay, though… like flyin'…"

Leo felt them coming in earnest, unwanted droplets of salt water, falling on his brother's cheeks and trickling down, making Raph blink at him, confused.

"God, you're so fucking brave… I wish I was as brave as you…"

"Y' wen' 'round th' world, bro…"

"And I still can't stand up for a single thing I believe in. That's cowardice in the flesh…"

" *Raphi… listen, we have to talk…"*

" *It's Raph, Leo. I gotta go get Mikey for scavenging…"*

" *No—wait. About what happened—last week…"*

" *That stupid fight… whatever, I'm over it."*

" *Fight? Raph"—*

" *I said I gotta go, Leo."*

" *Raph, NO, it wasn't"—*

" *Stop freaking out, Leo, I'm not mad you whooped me. It was just a dumb fight, anyway."*

" *R-Raph… You're just kidding, right? This is just some kinda joke?"*

" *What joke? I gotta go or Mikey's gonna start buggin' me."*

" *It's not funny, Raphi. Stop acting stupid."*

" *Hey—it's RAPH, remember? Raph. End of story. I gotta go."*

" *Just tell me you remember… please."*

" *What the heck is wrong with you? Leggo a' my arm, Leo"—*

" *TELL ME YOU REMEMBER!"*

" *REMEMBER WHAT!?"*

" *You… I… Raphi…"*

" *I… I gotta go, Leo. This is dumb."*

" *You… you're acting crazy… just tell me you remember."*

" *You're the one acting crazy. See you later, Leo."*

" *Raphi! Come back! Raph!"*

"How c'n you… call me *brave* , Leo?"

"You could've… could've told, Raph… but you didn't, and you let it… you let this… all of this…"

He expected Raphael to ask him what he was talking about—a vehement denial, or silence, even. He expected the lie to continue.

"You're m' brother."

Leo blinked. Such a simple response, capable of taking the air swiftly out of his lungs, like a mull-kick. Raph swallowed, brow furrowing again.

"'m sorry… 'm sorry I'm not stronger…"

The sob clawed its way out of Leonardo's resisting chest like a vicious, long-dwelling possessive spirit. He brought a hand up over his eyes, but felt Raph's a moment later, cool, almost not there but still, blessedly, *real* . Leo leaned into it, the sobs so loud in his head they erased all thought, unable to hear himself yell at his own weakness.

Raphael struggled to his knees, fighting the sense of bricks tying down his arms and legs, the way the world blurred in and out and spun somewhat unexpectedly. Maybe it was the pills… he could blame them later if he had to. For now… for now…

" *Leo, this Japanese book is boring… and I don't know half of these stupid kanji."*

" *Write down the ones you don't get, and I'll help you with them later."*

" *Why do I have to learn this, anyway?"*

" *Master Splinter says so—a lot of the texts we have to read eventually're in Japanese."*

" *That's dumb. English is better."*

" *That's a laugh, coming from the one who barely speaks it correctly."*

" *I'm perfectly capable when I feel inclined."*

" *Ha, I believe you. Then why do you speak like that?"*

" *I like it… people on the streets talk this way. Lots of ways. Like—Texas, y'all, and British, quite so—and Italiano, gratsi—and Joysey—and Minnessooota, doncha know—an' th' Sco'ish, and the like, California peeps"—*

" *How… how do you do that?"*

" *Easy. I just hear it."*

" *You switch so fast."*

" *It's easy, I guess…"*

" *Then so should Japanese, Raphi."*

" *I can hear it just fine, sometimes. But it's boring and readin' it's dumb."*

" *Hmm… watashi no casa wa kimi no casa da ne…"*

" *Leo… that was Spananese 'r somethin'…"*

" *You try, Raphi."*

" *What? It's dumb, Leo… Master Splinter'll get mad at you for teaching me wrong, won't he…?"*

" *He's not here. Just try."*

" *Um… o-frere-san, doko wa o-pere-san da ka."*

" *Frenchanese? Nice… Papa-san wa kaimono suru yo."*

" *This is so dumb…"*

" *You're laughing, aren't you?"*

" *Huh… you're so weird, Leo."*

" *Oh, I'm the weird one?"*

" *Didn't say I didn't like it, big bro."*

Leo blinked, unable to stop the sobs or speak intelligently, when he felt himself enfolded in his little brother's arms.

"I… I…" Leo choked out, his voice wheezing between sobs.

"S'not… s'not okay, Leo," Raph said, in that tired, quiet voice. "I dunno what it is… but s'not gonna last f'rever either. Shouldn't… can't make ya suffer f'rever f'r being a stupid kid… s'not right. Can't even do it t' y'rself… Won't let ya."

Leo nodded, his body still producing wracking sobs, shaking them both; Raph's weight deepened, until they both sank downward. Raphael's eyes couldn't seem to stay open anymore, and Leo, desperately calming himself, drew back a few inches from their embrace to watch his brother's struggling expression.

"We're gonna… gonna be crazy old coots s'mday…jus' like Mikey says…" Raph whispered, as though he were sleep talking. "I'll grow outta this… s'mday. When I stop havin' beers wi' Death, bro… then maybe I'll be a master like you… I promise… I don't wanna die…"

A Master. Leo thought of himself. Pictured himself as he must look right now—just as he'd been as a child, clutching his little brother like his life depended on it, like a stuffed animal when he was afraid of the dark—and worse still, something he'd never done then, doing now— *crying* . This ninjitsu Master… on the floor in a prison cell clutching his injured little brother and crying. He began to laugh suddenly, hysterical.

Then it wasn't hysterics anymore. He blinked away the saline, then let it be. More came. In joy.

Hey, Leo. Master Splinter said we won't be able to write you again, most likely, cuz the Ancient One's the only address where we know you'll be, so…I don't know. I've never written a letter before. I'm sure Donnie's part's got lots of advice and technical stuff and Mikey's got the jokes covered. You been gone a couple of months, really. Feels longer, I guess. Weird without your ugly face around here telling us what to do. Can't really go up top. Lots of downtime. And you'll be back in what, four more months? Cool, I guess. I've been training. Can't wait to kick your ass when you get back.

I'm just kidding. Maybe. I don't know. Hell, it's fucking boring around here without you to get in my face and up in my business and piss me off. I know you don't want some dumb novel from your kid brother or whatever out in wherever you are. So I'll wrap this up.

I saw this movie with Casey the other day and the guy snuck in the cargo area on a plane and there was no oxygen and stuff, so… I guess make sure there's always a pet getting loaded on your flights. I guess. And, um, there's a tsunami in Indonesia right now, so… yeah. Might wanna stay outta there. You probably knew that. Of course you did. Fucking Mr. Perfect.

Hope you're having a great time on your little break. Get back so I can whoop you in training again… Mike and Don are way too easy.

Oh, yeah. Don't die or nothing. That'd be really fucking annoying, bro.

Raph

Raph was staring at him, a small frown between his eyes.

"M-master… like me…." Leo said between laughs. "Like me… I'm so glad… So glad—you're not like me… just a little bit…" He was stroking his brother's face, and realized it, in the same way he realized his use of *anata* instead of the brotherly *kimi* . "This is what I look like without our dear father around to tell me what to do… if only you'd seen me in the jungle—what am I talking about? In the jungle… I might as well've been having tea… compared…"

But Raphael wasn't laughing. Leo wanted to see him laugh at him, in derision. He'd finally lost it, hadn't he? Finally Raph could see the underside of the rock again, and not just in fever dreams, when the behavior could be passed off as an aberration of the controlled self. But when he looked closer, he could see he wasn't the only one losing it—something sat, weighted down by immeasurable strain, in his brother's eyes.

"Please… please don't leave me again…" Leo whispered, hardly aware of his voice or the note in it—the note of strangling weakness.

" *Leonardo… you must lend him your strength…"*

"No… he's strong enough… I need him, not the other way around…" Leo answered the voice. "Why're you telling me this? I don't understand…"

" *Raphi, what's wrong? Hey! I'm talking to you!"*

" *Still think it's funny? I'll bet you do! Go ahead back to Mikey and Donnie and laugh it up!"*

" *Raphi, are you serious? All Mikey did was trip you. Ninjas do way worse."*

" *I don't care! That's a fight—you guys were waitin' for it, just so you could laugh at me!"*

" *We were not, Raphael. The world doesn't revolve around you. It was just… funny. Don't take it so seriously."*

" *Why d'you ask me to do something you know I can't? Master Splinter asks me why I don't try an' fly away or somethin'—I'm a turtle, I don't fly. An' you! It's serious to me! I hate it and you freakin' laugh!"*

" *Then learn not to hate it."*

" *Wh-what?"*

" *If you hate it, just… turn it off. Don't react. He'll stop eventually. Until then, just… stop caring. Don't feel anything about it and take it in stride."*

" *You mean… N—No. No. Never."*

" *I do it all the time."*

" *NO! It's… the world doesn't work like that. If something's wrong you don't just… stop caring that it's happenin' to you."*

" *You can't change it. Mikey wants your attention. Either you give him attention and encourage him, or just… shut it off."*

" *B-but… I just… why won't he leave me alone?"*

" *The why doesn't matter for you. The reality is, he won't stop. That's how it is, right? You're a realistic person. Just stop caring."*

" *Leo… why're you tellin' me this?"*

" *Because I hate seeing you suffer. You feel everything a thousand times worse than anyone else. It'll never stop until you learn when not to care."*

" *B-but… I don't wanna… be like that, Leo…"*

" *Raphi…I'm not telling you this to hurt you. You think I'd ever try to hurt you?"*

" *No… I don't think you'd ever try to hurt me, Leo."*

" *Let's go home, Raphi… c'mon."*

" *Can't we stay out here a little longer?"*

" *Why?"*

" *N-no reason. It's just…"*

" *Let's go skip stones for a while over in the north intersection."*

" *Leo? It's just… maybe if I stop caring 'bout Mikey makin' jokes… then maybe… I won't care about anything anymore. Y' know?"*

" *I just wish you didn't let it get to you so much… Mikey and Donnie always see, and then the way they look at you… and Master Splinter*

looks at you… like they feel sorry for you or something. Like they really think you're insane sometimes… it makes me… feel like… I dunno…"

" *Like what?"*

" *Do you have to be so morbid all the time, Raphi?"*

" *Like what, Leo?"*

" *Like… like…"*

" *Go on."*

" *L-like ripping someone's head off."*

"Raph…" Leo quivered, and this time his voice was no longer audible.

That hand, tapping out the beat again, and the flicker of his brother's eyes, suppressed fire, struggling to flare into life.

" *Choke, choke again, I thought my demons were my friends… getting me in the end, they're out to get me… Since I was young, I've tasted sorrow on my tongue, and the sweet sugar gun does not protect me* …"

Saved in the sound.

It seemed so childish. Leo had usually found solace in meditation, yoga, doing easy kata, listening to calming Japanese music, and drinking green tea. Upon thought, perhaps he derived more comfort from these things because they were what he was supposed to do, to set a good example, to be dutiful while Raph sat amid bike parts and listened to Korn and Mikey read magazines all day blasting Jet in the background. Had he ever even fought it, to try and be something else, someone separate?

Yes. And he'd lost. Something in him was inherently wrong—too wrong—to stray out of line, even for an instant. He could and would become crazier than his twin. But perhaps this was a chicken-and-the-egg argument. What had he fought against?

Not Master Splinter. No… their father was also a pawn of something. Raphael? No. His brother sat in line to get messed up the worst by the onslaught of struggles, because he felt everything so strongly; despite it, Raph had held onto his own self tenaciously.

Reality.

He'd fought reality.

And reality, physics, always wins out.

Walk against the flow, and eventually something's gotta give. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, you lost.

And that one time out of a hundred… Maybe one time in at least a hundred he'd been unaccountably close with his little brother, he'd planted something good, or changed something for the better within himself, created some link even reality couldn't change.

Or perhaps it was, in that last time, Raphael had let him see past all those mysterious layers that had fascinated him so, and he'd seen… seen—

Fear. His brother was afraid for him. And of him.

There was a deep love, that held under impenetrable layers could turn to outward hatred in a flash of eyes and misplaced words.

There was a metallic clinking sound, and Leo looked—to see twin, severed handcuffs rubbing against each other

The sound made Raphael blink, fully himself again, though still wavering from the drug.

"Leo… I'm not gonna be… I refuse t' be your Frankenstein monster anymore… 's not fair t' you. 'S not fair t' anyone. Jus' takes too much energy… too much, when our friends 'r gettin' married, an' there's this little kid who needs our help, and Mikey an' Don've been watchin' this bullshit all their lives, waitin' fer us to grow up. An' even if Master Splinter comes back—he's getting' old, Leo. We gotta… we gotta stop. I feel like we've been lyin' on our backs in that tunnel fer years now… we both changed, but everythin' jus' comes back to it, bro. I don't want somethin' like that to control my life." He winced, looking up at the ceiling, in the same way he had when he was thirteen, gazing up through bars at a light-filled world. "Man, Mikey's out there somewhere tryin' to deal with what he's done. We both know it ain't a nice feelin'."

" *Leo! LEO! Wait up!"*

" *Hey, Raphi. How's Jay doing?"*

" *Letting him go tomorrow, I think."*

" *You upset?"*

" *No… he's gonna fly. Out of the sewers. Like he's supposed to. He can't fly around down here."*

" *Well… you won't have him anymore."*

" *Leo. Jay is a BIRD."*

" *So? Doesn't mean you can't be attached to him."*

" *Birds fly. Why would I keep a bird here?"*

" *I just… I just thought maybe you'd be sad because you have to let him go, that's all. I'd be sad."*

" *Really? That's weird. I mean, what else can I do?"*

" *It's not about that. You should still be sad. Don't you want to keep him?"*

" *What we want's never mattered, Leo. Jay's a bird. I'm letting him go."*

" *You always… I just think it's weird that you don't care."*

" *How would you know you would be sad if you had to let Jay go? You've never had a bird."*

" *I'd be sad if… if I…Doesn't it bother you?"*

" *Leo? Can I ask a question?"*

" *About what?"*

" *Why would someone do seppuku?"*

" *Why are you so interested in that? It's creepy."*

" *No it's not. You're interested. You asked lots of questions. I couldn't understand Master Splinter's answers."*

" *That's 'cause you didn't read the book I did. It was a samurai novel. It was missing the end and some middle chapters though. I really missed some important parts."*

" *Tell me."*

" *Master Splinter's gonna be really mad if he finds out I talked to you so much about this. He still thinks you're too young to be talking about… y'know, death… so much."*

" *I don't talk about death that much."*

" *Yes you do. You're obsessed. Ever since we saw that dead crow and you tried to bring it home with us to fix it…"*

" *I thought it was still alive."*

" *It had maggots."*

" *DON'T talk about that… I hate maggots…I have dreams about maggots…"*

" *I know. You've been sneaking down to my bed a lot"—*

" *You talk about seppuku in your sleep, Leo."*

" *No I don't! You liar!"*

" *I'm not lying and you know it! Tell me!"*

" *Raphi… you listen to the fuzzy channels on the radio. You've been collecting feathers from dead birds. What's up with you lately?"*

" *You're obsessed with suicide."*

" *That didn't answer my question."*

" *You didn't listen hard enough."*

" *We're not talking about this anymore. I have to think about your well-being."*

" *Why are you obsessed with suicide?"*

" *I'm not. Why would I want to kill myself?"*

" *Maybe you like the idea better than letting someone else do it."*

" *That's stupid, Raphi."*

" *I'm not stupid."*

" *Then why do you act like it?"*

" *I don't act stupid around you. I guess… you have to be smart to act dumb."*

" *You believe you're smart now?*

" *You said I'm smart, Leo."*

" *I say a lot of things…"*

" *Yeah, but I know when you're just tryin' to be mean."*

Leo found himself staring at the ceiling as well, seeing the cascade of blood as Mikey had taken his first life. His own had been so long ago. It seemed strange that all the world didn't do the dos-e-dos with death, just like him.

"I should have committed *seppuku* … for what I did. If I ever transgress again—I promise you"—he was facing a sad-faced Raph, a note of pleading in his voice.

"I don't want you to die, idiot."

"It's the honorable thing to do." Staunch, a slab of marble, toy train on plastic tracks.

"Huh. Given a choice 'tween honor 'n my bro, I'll take my bro. Honor's just air, Leo—just an idea. S'not real. Can't touch it… or… or…"

Their faces were close now. "That seems so simpleminded…" Leo said, unconvincingly. Raph shook his head.

"Seems like it. But you think long n' hard. I's one a' the hardest things t' really wrap yer head around. Way harder 'n the idea a' honor itself. Hard to let go."

"I'm not like you… I'm not content with reality and nothing else. I need honor… it gives things some meaning. To help things make sense. To help remind us why we're here."

"You dunno why we're here, Leo," Raph said, still smiling. "We jus' are. To live, I guess. The world ain't got any honor. Maybe you're the only one—no one's expectin' ya to kill yerself. Jus' gotta do the right thing. Both a' us. Like we didn't do before."

"Raph—you did nothing wrong. It wasn't your fault."

Raphael laughed in a whisper of pained breath. "Protectin' you was wrong, Leo. I wasn't equal t' the task… an' Master Splinter woulda never punished you. Not like we thought… if there's one thing I learned from the streets, it's that there's always reasons and circumstances. The reality… of our lives, Leo… gotta take what you c'n get. Sometimes there's no room fer honor and *seppuku* . Like a… rock in a stream, right? Like ya said. Let things… come ta you…"

Leo turned his face into the crook of his brother's neck, trapped against the warmth and the steady, tranquilized pulse. Things Raphael wouldn't normally say, and he knew it. It didn't mean his brother didn't think them.

"I'll tell you a secret, Raphi… I dream, sometimes… of ripping you out of your shell and killing myself as you die, your neck between my fingers, like some fever nightmare. Then we'll be somewhere else, dead, in a cell like this. Together. No eyes. Just you and me—no judgment, or time, or end, or beginning. I don't know how long I've been like this, or even why… it's like my heart is thrashing against my shell sometimes, screaming to get out. I don't know what's wrong with me."

Surprisingly, Raphael laughed, low and gruff and everything he'd ever remembered; he could feel the humming vibration as it sung along his throat, a low chord struck just below the strumming pulse.

"Can't be perfect all the time, Fearless. Nothin's wrong with ya… yer just… responsible. For a world, really. 'n it's not somethin' I c'n… help you with. No matter what I do, you'll end up feelin' guilty. Yer own worst enemy, bro."

The words stroked Leo's ears, half-meaningless. "What… what were the lyrics again? All of them. The whole song."

"You're fuckin' ridiculous."

"No, I'm not. You listen to it over and over again. It means something."

"Yer always tryin' ta find meanin' where there ain't any, bro. I already told ya… it's the sound, not the words. Different."

"Just tell me. Now."

Raphael's voice had such a way of recreating the beat, without singing the rhythm or including the actual melody… monotone whisper, held in the throat, more breath than mouth, staring at the ceiling; Leo listened, close against his neck, lying like a threat and a mantle near his jugular, beating faster and faster.

" *I am watching the rise and fall of my… salvation. There's so much shit around me—such a lack of compassion. I thought it would be fun and games. Instead—it's all the same. I want something to do… Need to feel the sickness—in you. I feel the reason, as it's leaving me—no, not again. It's quite deceiving, as I'm feeling the flesh make me bad…… All I'll do is look for you—I know your fix, you need it too—Just to get some sort of—attention… attention… What does it mean to you? For me it's something, I just do. I want something… I need to feel the sickness… in you…* " His voice grew strained; Leo had stopped breathing entirely, and they both knew it, not matching gazes. " *I feel the reason, as it's leaving me—no, not again… Does it make me bad?…* "

The beat interrupted, a hitched breath, of physical pain and the upward curve of the question, altering the tone on that last syllable, a question sincerely asked, awaiting an answer.

Eyes connect, with the suddenness of the hunted, opaqueness fallen away.

" *There you are. Why're you hiding all the way out here?"*

" *Just wanted to think for a while, Leo."*

" *Don't we usually come out here together? What's up?"*

" *Nothing… I just wanted to listen, that's all."*

" *Mind if I sit with you for a while?"*

" *I was just going in."*

" *Oh. I guess that's a good idea. I'll walk back with you."*

" *You don't havta. Don't need you to baby-sit me any more—I'm thirteen now, remember?"*

" *I… I want to. That's all."*

Leo's eyes were wild, betraying all the layers of lies and quick-study repression he'd carefully tempered over his thoughts, shining veneers and coats of detailed paint. Wild, unfocused, intense with feeling and the rush to the surface of a million dark half-visages that floated through his mental landscape. Nightmares of violence and suicide, poisoned dreams and that core, where something light and pure sat, at its edges corrupted, stagnated, which he returned to in his best moments, subconsciously.

Driven towards a conclusion, driven towards that failure. Raphael.

The living body. A thing that represented Hamato Leonardo's greatest failure.

Sickness.

Who was injured? Which one was crying? Who had taken the pain killers? Who was fading, falling asleep, drenched in anguish, shell cracked into glass spider webs?

An image of his brother, young, wearing a blue bandanna, amber eyes glancing out at him, mirrors of his own.

Who wore blue and who red? Minor details, surface differences. Who had snapped the pigeon's neck, who clasped the dead body for three days, drawing close to the enemy maggots as they wormed through the dead eyes, sucked in the fatal rotting scent, over-sweet and over-ripe, rank and raw and inciting the instincts, but for them—inverse. Draw closer, rather than lance away.

A draw towards the mirror, towards this deadly, reflective surface. Nothing outside those identical eyes, endlessly refracting, eyes within faces within eyes within faces…

Until the pools shuddered, flickered, losing light.

Leo blinked; their faces were half an inch apart, lips hovering, but Raphael was gasping and struggling for breath.

Leo felt the tension, wrapped tight through all of his muscles, clawing his hands—could feel, rather than merely hear, the beat of the heart—that beat that thrummed desperate and true through the city—the hum of breath in the throat—his clawed hands—a nightmare, fever and poison, and return.

Cold with shock, he pried his fingers off his brother's neck, but Raphael's eyes hadn't left his, darkening.

That defiant smile; a faint voice, over that beat, just another gentle, compelling layer.

"Leo… There you are."

The Paper Crane

Author's Note: Alternate Ch. 15 and Alternate Ch. 16 can now both be found on my homepage. This version of Walking the Line found on known as the "Salvation" version, will continue here; the alternate, "Damnation," will take a much darker route and will only be available on my homepage. All sequels to this trilogy will be to the Salvation version unless otherwise noted. I hope you enjoy Damnation—if you wish to review, you can review here under the parallel chapter or on my homepage, though space is a little more limited there. Thanks and enjoy!

" *That was really cool, Raphi* ."

" *Go away, Mikey. I'm not in the mood for your jokes."*

" *I'm serious. It was neat—you were all zoooom, and then the croc was like"—*

" *Stop making fun of me."*

" *I'm not! It was cool. Really."*

" *Um… thanks, I guess. You uh… wanna go skip rocks, Mikey?"*

" *Really? Yeah!"*

" *Wait—I think Leo's calling…"*

" *No he's not! Come on, before he finds us!"*

" *But—Mikey!"*

Michelangelo closed his eyes.

Raphael came into the lair, beaming, a small, squirming ball of feathers gripped gently between his hands. He set his burden lightly on a table after setting newspaper over it, and Mikey crept up to look.

It was a pigeon, but one could barely tell by looking at it. A baby, screaming with a high-pitched squak, matted with blood on its right wing, and missing feathers all along its neck.

"Raphael—my son, what do have there?" Their father came forward, a slight smile around his furry muzzle. Raph's face was wary.

"It's a baby. I saw it get attacked by a big mean crow bird so I grabbed it when it came by the gutter. Can I take care've it, Master Splinter?"

Splinter's smile grew wider. "We do not turn away the injured and low of heart in this house, Raphael. I'm sure your patient will do nicely under your care—provided that, as always, you let it go back up to the surface when the healing is complete."

"I will, sensei, don't worry," Raphi said, getting some water and beginning to gently mop the blood off the bird's feathers.

"Raphael—where is your brother?"

Raphi looked up, as though remembering. "I ran back after I found it —he should've been behind me."

As if on cue, Leo fell through the door, panting. "Jeez, Raphi—you eat jet fuel for breakfast or something?" He came forward. "Did you… get it back… okay?" He bowed to Master Splinter in apology, who waved it off.

"Yeah, I think so. Where's Donnie? I think it's a boy but I need him to tell me for sure."

Splinter and Leo sat at the table, where Mikey had picked up a sheet of newspaper and was folding it deftly, watching Raph and the pigeon.

"Donatello is working with the water heater, I believe. Michelangelo, what craft are you scheming up?"

"Origami!" Mikey beamed, and received a wide, indulgent smile from their father. Leonardo sat closer to Raph, rolling his eyes at Mikey, and started to help by cutting up a few clean wood shards to use as a splint for the wing. They worked in tandem, in silence.

Mikey finished his little project, and, leaning over, topped Raph's head nicely with a too-large newspaper nurse's cap, making Raph frown.

"There, Raphi—now you can be a nurse. It's Nurse Raphi t' the rescue!"

Raphael's frown deepened, shooting a hot warning look at Leo when he started chortling. Raph took off the cap, his eyes bright, and slid it back towards Mikey.

"Only girls wore nurse caps, Mikey—and 'sides, nurses're on the surface. I can't be a nurse."

Mikey cocked his head, still grinning. "So? Just pretend, Raphi. Don't be a stick-in-the-mud."

"I'm a turtle. Not a stick," Raphi commented, beginning to set the bird's wing. "Don't havta be nothin' else."

The pigeon cooed, struggling less as it realized the splint didn't hurt. Raphi petted it gently with one finger, setting his head on the table to look at it face-to-face; he smiled at it, watching it peck under its other wing.

"That setting is well done, my son. You seem to know how its wings work."

"Raphi watches the pigeons!" Mikey burst out. "Raphi—maybe you wish you were a pigeon? You're dirty enough."

Raph scowled. "Lee'me alone, Mikey. Didn't do nothin' to you."

"Michelangelo—enough jokes for now. Raphael is not laughing," Splinter scolded gently.

Mikey sat heavily, fiddling with the hat; he unfolded it, and began to turn it into something else, only half-planning what it would be. He ended up with a badly-bent newspaper crane, and began petting it.

"Look, I've got a pigeon too!"

Leo grinned and rolled his eyes. "Copying Raphi, what a loser."

Raphi looked up from the pigeon long enough to gaze hard at the origami bird; he smiled slightly, to Mikey's surprise, before turning again to the real thing.

Michelangelo's heart had skipped a beat, when that ghost of a smile flitted around his older brother's normally scowling face—a look he usually reserved for Leo and injured fowl, turned on something Mikey had done. Forever separated by his brother's unfathomability, his opaqueness.

Now separated by a steel wall, smeared with blood.

Mikey found his hands running over the smooth, cool metal, as though it were his brother's face.

What he was hearing… it was impossible. A nightmare born of taking lives, feeling the squealch of blood between his fingers, brain pulp on his face, closing his eyes to avoid the stench as bowels released…

Then he heard it, in the next cell—Leo's voice, shouting.

Mikey's vocal cords had rusted over—too much oxygen from screaming. Mike was suddenly sure he was no longer a person… just an empty blood rag. He recalled the way it steamed as it left their bodies… dimly recalled how he'd wondered, "Does my blood steam too?"

It was black and silky and wholly disgusting, treads of offal and drying tar, a smell of chopped meat and outhouses, the sewers plus upended, rainforest graveyards, hot and rotting. He had leaned his head against the cool steel. Had listened to his brothers in the next cell. Had imagined the unimaginable. Perhaps he'd fallen asleep, sunk into nightmares. He was rusting, covered in blood. A child rusting into an adult. The Tin Man.

When a man's an empty kettle

He should be on his mettle

And yet I'm torn apart

Just because I'm presumin'

I could be kind of human

If I only had a heart.

"Raph…" Mikey whispered into the wall.

Because even iron mothers and steely brothers could be hurt and killed… because even Mikey could rust, as uncaring as he'd ever been whether he was human or not, as to how poisonous his words could be.

A child is heartless, and cruel. It is the wild abandon and the privilege of youth.

Then a flash, his brother's bright eyes, reflecting the sun, as he watched a flock of birds take flight, as pigeons cooed their gentle song into the gutters. A child can be heartless, but Raphael had

never been. Pigeons gone into the glare of the sun, light filling the world, hope disappears, lines disappear, shadows deepen; there, his brother in the place where damaging fire filled them and illuminated them, asking to be seen, to be heard, to be felt. Hope lifted like vapor out of their subterranean ground, when the sun finally hit—the world of men elevating his brother, tempting with lies and long, deadly arms. Mikey knew what Raphael was running from now—knew it fully, with every drop of blood on his hands. That dangerous life that demanded sacrifice. That secretive existence in shadows, where more things than mutants dwelled—mutated hearts, festering emotions, dark-stained thoughts and dreams.

" *Raphi… d'you miss Jay?"*

" *Doesn't matter."*

" *Yeah, it does. Why wouldn't it matter?"*

" *Had to let him go either way. No use cryin' about it."*

" *Oh. Yeah, I guess. But you always cry 'bout stuff."*

" *Jus' leave me alone, Mikey. I don't wanna talk about it."*

" *You're so crazy, Raphi. Loony-loony—we gotta get you a straight jacket!"*

" *Stop it!"*

" *You're gonna cry, you're gonna cry! Knew you wanted to cry!"*

" *STOP! I HATE YOU! YOU'RE THE MOST ANNOYING LITTLE BROTHER IN THE WORLD!"*

" *Crybaby, crybaby!"*

" *Master Splinter!"*

" *Tattletale crybaby—I'm gonna tell Leo!"*

" *No—wait! Don't!"*

" *LEEEEEOOOO! Raphi says I'm annoying and he hates me!"*

" *Mikey, god! Why d'you have to tell Leo? You're such a jerk!"*

" *Haha, you're crying again, I can't even tell what you're saying!"*

Michelangelo watched the blood, steady like a heart's pulse, drip-drip from his fingers to the floor, mesmerizing sound, the soul of a beat. A beaten child, with a box.

Saved in the sound.

Do what others say,

I'm here standing hollow.

Falling away from me

Falling—away from me.

Day, is here fading

That's when, I would say

You flirted with suicide

Sometimes, kill the pain

I can always say:

" *It's gonna be better tomorrow."*

Falling away from me

Falling—away from me.

Steady drip-drip… the blood of people and lives Mikey knew absolutely about, who would never appear on TV, in the news, in the magazines. Stories impossible to know… and why should he care? Because he'd wanted to be a vigilante, and he couldn't be sure why anymore.

Life's falling away from me.

It's falling away from me.

He was Michelangelo. The clown, the rusting tin man, covered over in oxidized blood so like the bright red lipstick smeared over the walls and over buffoon's faces, a deadly horror show on the covers of magazines. Who was he? Michelangelo. Make me a Sistine Chapel. Smear it on the walls, a symphony of blind sound.

Maikeranjirou. Look, Master Splinter. I wrote my name in kanji.

Beating me down,

Beating me, Beating me,

Down

— Down

Into the ground

Screaming some sound.

— Beating me, Beating me,

Down

— Down

Into the ground…

"I… feel the reason… as it's leaving me… no… not again…" Mikey breathed, with his failing vocal cords. His brother's lullaby. Black sheep over fences in Massachusetts, where he'd punched a hole through the barn wall while Raphael lay injured in the bathtub and Leo kept his solitary vigil. Gone too far against the mask of himself while no one dared to look on, even Donatello scared away by his coldness and sudden burst of flame as he hit the punching bag. Channeling Raphael's spirit, the very anger that had taken him up to the deadly rooftop and sent him crashing into their midst, and reminded them of their fragile mortality.

Children in the street, cheering for the runaway. Maybe she became a Foot soldier; maybe in an alternate reality, she stayed at home until her father raped her and then she joined the Foot. He didn't know. Too many lines in blood to trace, divined upon the steely wall. Maybe that was her vena cava draped over his foot. Faceless deaths, only his brother's life. And how brilliantly he could fail, here on the other side of this wall, while Raphael slipped away, just feet from his bloodstained hands, and a world apart.

Then Mikey grasped, searched for hope. Raphael's eyes following a flock of pigeons, lifting out—lifting them all out—away from the sewers. A spark, that glean of challenge, flame—Leo's staunch shoulders, flowing like water in battle, against the jerky flares and dies of Raphael's punches, both immeasurably fast, two forces wholly unalike, yet somehow smoke and ripples, blood as it separates into liquid, identical, beautiful, a ballet of strange semblances. No one could tell him they weren't truly brothers—not Raphael and Leonardo, not with eyes, light-flecked amber and depths of hidden amber, things frozen in time, petrified, and streams fast-flowing above—both life-blood and immortality.

A red neon sign through a torrent of rain—Mikey saw it, and wondered why.

Whatever it was, he had done what Raphael and Leonardo had done, had joined a strange rank, without having meant to. Some root formed between them, writhing and stretching between his veins and

theirs. Whatever it was, he was broken, and so were they; then he heard it, Raphael's voice, clear and strong as daylight:

"…There you are."

Something freed itself from the imprisonment of Mikey's ribcage, flew free, though he couldn't see it.

The he heard explosions out in the corridor, and found himself on his feet.

Donnie.

References: "If I Only Had a Heart" from *The Wizard of Oz* ; "Falling Away from Me" and "Make Me Bad" by Korn.

In the Mind

Author's Note: Hey, guys; sorry about the delay—as it says on my profile, I am in London currently, studying Shakespeare with UCLA summer sessions. I hope you all enjoy this chapter; so those of you following Damnation know, since this is Donatello's last chapter before he discovers what has happened to his brothers, this chapter is the SAME in BOTH versions, and it is the last chapter that will be so. The next chapter of Damnation is also done and will be up as soon as the next chap of Salvation is ready. A one-shot will also appear here on that is part of Damnation, but that I think will be enjoyed by all. Enjoy, and for all you Donatello-lovers, feedback is appreciated! (I know—OMG, Aub wrote a chap with NO Raph and Leo, is it possible?!)

Don spent some time in a corner of the vents, as far from the sound of storming, searching ninja as possible, to check over his detonation devices and neatly line up his explosives. Inwardly, he berated himself—while the First Aid kit might be doing them some good, he couldn't believe he gave his duffle bag to Leo. He felt strangely naked and even worse, vulnerable, particularly with the large, glowing eyes on the other side of the duct, carefully watching all of his activities with a practiced, notating gaze.

Lizzie seemed unable to take her stare from the items, and Don knew he should make some attempt to do some comforting routines, go through a diadem of empty words. Sadly, his well bucket came up dry—truth be told, while Mikey's powers of observation could psychoanalyze even the briefest of gestures, Raph had a decent emotional intelligence and Leo was very attuned to his brothers' difficulties, Donnie spen the greatest amount of his time—particularly in the last year and a half—in the company of metal and plastic and chemicals. His powers over the phone had only served to separate him further from humanity and general fraternizing.

"No interrogate me?" Lizzie asked; she spoke, not in a monotone, but in a slightly bitter tone—her eyes remained on the explosives.

Donnie snapped up a bit, half disturbed and half startled. "Wh—beg your pardon?"

Lizzie reached out a finger to touch one of the jars of plastic explosive, and Don gently tapped in warning.

"I have way too many reckless little brothers to allow random accidents, little lady," he said sternly; in the resulting silence, Don cleared his throat. "I know you can speak normally. Acting like you're crazy won't protect you from facing this, Elizabeth."

Lizzie glared. "Not acting. You—I… don't—know— *nothing* !"

Donatello wasn't fazed; he went on with his work, checking the plastics and the seals for moisture, made sure the explosives would synch with his PDA. "You articulated with some talent when Karai questioned you."

Lizzie glared; very abruptly, she leaned her head back against the vent behind her. "Tired."

Donatello blinked—he tapped a small vial of liquid tucked into his belt, pondering its bright red contents. "You know—your mother's blood is very interesting. See, I placed it into this vial—and since then, it has died and regenerated without any outside influence at least three times. I think you can explain this. Am I right?"

No response.

"You have a name. You had a home. You had a school. Right? That's what humans do. Our world isn't yours."

Lizzie shuddered, looking out of the corner of her eyes at him. " *You* have a name. *You* have a home. *You* have a school. Only one world."

Donatello almost dropped the vial, and for a long, agonizing second, he could not be sure why exactly he wanted to run as fast as possible in any direction, as far from this child and the dim echo from some uncertain past as he possibly could.

"Fine—you're Lizzie belowground. What about above?" Don asked, refusing to stop pushing; what he had seen in the chamber opposite Karai told him that Lizzie was indeed the key, and he needed to know exactly why. "Look—my brothers have been captured, we have a googolplex of ninjas to deal with—not to deal in hyperbole—and I know you understand every word I'm saying, and I need to know what we're dealing with."

Lizzie blinked; her cheekbones moved up, but she matched gazes with Donatello. "Why did you rescue me? You were supposed to let Karai have me. Better that way. I wouldn't've told her—not ever. Didn't want Raphi captured or hurt."

Donnie continued to be stern. "We're not exactly in the business of letting children remain in the hands of homicidal crime syndicates, thank you. Our father taught us better than that—and I'm rather sure your mother taught you better than to do something that puts you on the side of the bad guys."

Lizzie huddled down into herself. "Mom can't talk anymore. Can't teach me nothin'."

Donnie sighed. "I'm afraid I'm not very proficient at this. I do know I've lost my father twice and it's never easy. But if you care one way or the other about living past that point, you have to help me take this down. And that means I have to know what it is we're looking at. The schematics showed a constructed, biomechanical Shredder using cloned DNA. I also saw that remains of his brain matter was to be placed in the helmet. What's the purpose of dead matter if it was already cloned?"

Lizzie remained silent; she was gazing down the dark vent shafts, as though reading something in the black.

Lizzie sighed. "I'm… name…"

"Don't worry about that if it's hard," Don tried, but she snapped her head up.

"NO—name… I'm, I'm… K-Kristen Roberts, Mrs. Juniper's class, third grade—phone number 555-1382…"

Donatello blinked. Unless he was very much mistaken, human kids took the third grade at age eight or nine, so Lizzie had been underground for at least a year.

Two years was the time since they had last seen the Shredder. He spoke in a strangely awed whisper. "Your mother—Daphne Roberts—what did she do?"

"As-assistant scientist… in a lab owned by a Japanese company. Lots of projects… then one day my mom picked me up from school, and took me to the lab. She told me about this man, who they wanted to bring back, because the company said so… she said some group of criminals controlled the company from Tokyo. The man was really bad—he killed people and made the group stronger in Japan and brought it here to America. His name was"—

"Oroku Saki," Donatello finished for her. "Right. Go on."

Lizzie swallowed; she appeared to be drawing the recall of her mind out and reading it on the walls. "He… he adopted a daughter, some relative of his, named Karai—and she kept the Japan group going when he came here, to start it up again…" She stopped, faltered, took a deep breath, then went on.

"Lots of kids here joined him, when I was still going to school—even… even boys from my class. Then the Shredder went away, and the group fell apart, so the… this company with the group in Japan started the lab behind Karai's back. A guy named Stockman found a way to do it—some… this radiation and a chemical stuff he invented.

So he poisoned some of the ninjas who hid from the cops and used it on them."

Here Lizzie gulped air; she was very pale, and speaking was more exercise than it appeared hse had engaged in for a long time.

"They did the same stuff over and over again—they'd sleep and be dead and then they'd wake up again and keep—keep going… so… so mom took me to the computer, and showed me the schematics and told me to memorize them, so we could tell the government what this company was doing. That way they would have nothing left of his research—no disks or paper." She sped up, frenzied to get it out. "So I looked at it and my brain took pictures… and when I turned around, she was… she was on the floor."

Don had, without having meant to, leaned forward over his explosives, looking her dead in the face, enraptured with answers, his brain inundating itself with further questions. When she stopped, he found himself hanging there, watching intently.

Lizzie had shut down, burrowed back into her bundle of clothing, watching the explosives.

Donnie took a breath. "So… so *you* blew up the lab. Right?"

Lizzie spoke from under a muffling short collar. "Bad place."

His need to have answers almost overwhelmed the trickle of sympathy he felt for her; he wouldn't have to worry about either, however, as an ungodly scream tore him away from his questioning. Lizzie perked up, and helped him to start gathering his explosives.

"Do you understand my plan?" he asked her, and she gave a stoic salute. Just what he wanted to see.

They trotted, bent double in the small vent, through the clanging metal tunnel, until coming to a dead-end and a vent; Donnie kicked it in, and slithered down, catching his charge neatly after his feet met

smooth metal flooring. He had not seen this portion of the warehouse anywhere but on his PDA; it was absent of blood from Mikey's rampage or Raph's conveyance to the holding cells, unconscious. Donnie inwardly berated himself; if he hadn't had the child with him, he would have been able to free at least Leo from capture, hence making his entire operation simpler. But he was dealing in contradictions. If he didn't have the child, the mission would be a failure; had she not needed rescue, they would not be here; had he and Leo not given in and passed her off to the Foot, there would be no need for said operation at all. He would be sitting tight at home with his inventions and studying the constantly rejuvenating cells he'd gathered from Daphne Roberts. The dead woman who now stalked them, with the herald of an inhuman scream.

"She must degenerate every time," he mused aloud. "And her injuries in the sewers probably destroyed too much tissue beyond the capability of repair for her specialized cells."

He studiously avoided her name; he dabbled in calling the dead creature an "it," but missing his father beyond known reckoning told him suck a thing was cruel. Master Splinter would know what to do now. Master Splinter would know how to fix his brothers, how to make Mikey stop hurting, and Raph stop suffering, and Leo stop aching with guilt, and help Donnie… help him to feel like a person again. Too many days in a dark alcove, staring at a way to cheat death. The philosopher's stone of the modern age—radiation and chemistry, Mary Shelley's monster sewn meticulously, with an ironic eye, back into life. Daphne Roberts. The mother who tried to live—and love—forever. A lamia's lament, mother of the ghoul, eater of children's flesh, a woman scorned, the most fearsome beast—Mother. A creature about which Donatello knew nothing. Mother, a dream of sightless white, simplistic thought, eat, breathe, swim, kick, water and warm air. He supposed mammal mothers and daughters were a mystery, and he had no hypothesis.

Don's plan was simple and elegant: create chaos, get his brothers out, and run like bats were on his ankles. With Lizzie's silent help, he crept from shadow to shadow, watching as troops of ninja—several shaken or severely injured by Mikey or Raph—patrolled the corridors. He allowed himself generous observation of Karai's headquarters—well-organized, each ninja belonging to a firm, designated group, rather than the chaotic, flimsy organization of the Shredder's day. The walls were clean, yet he knew a rotting monster dragged its fingers across the deceptive metal. His last dealings with the Foot were in back-alleys, junk yards, and roofs—yet there had been something neat and simplistic about that. The ninja had enough pride in Shredder to keep their weapons free of dirt and sand. Yet now… technological and chemical filth, invisible radiation, a tinge of purple poisons, a seldom-maintenanced metal youkai, a modern zombie. His brain whirled; a well of contradictions.

Lizzie attached their third explosive, a dry powder number with a remote detonation, and looked up at Donnie for approval. After glaring out in continued observation for a moment, Don at last noticed it. They were out of explosives, and nowhere near the prisons.

"Ah, well. We'll have to hope most of the goons come in this direction and we still have enough time to get my brothers out of incarceration."

Lizzie blinked; after a time, her eyes looked to Don somehow shadowed.

"Raphi hurt."

Don stared for a moment—he was well aware that Raph was hurt, and Lizzie wasn't the type to state the unnecessary. They ducked into a corner as two Foot ninja came by, though neither could be on patrol—moving slowly, one hobbled on an oozing ankle, while his mate supported him, possibly in the direction of an infirmary, or at least in the way of some good antibacterial. Or a shot in the head. Don really expected most anything from the Foot. As observant eyes

followed this downtrodden pair, the second truth of Lizzie's words crept upon him; Raph was injured, and they would have to get him out of here—slowly, carefully, and undetected, in a very short period of time. Well. That certainly complicated things. Donnie had been thinking so hard about the headquarters, about his questions and theories and half-answers, that this simple fact had somehow eluded him.

Many simple facts were eluding him. The very inner composites of the metal in the walls distracted Don from the task at hand; the workings of physics upon cells and atoms, the invisible formulae and equations making up a dead, yet living, free-flowing world surrounding him. Standing above himself, he distantly saw his eyes growing distant.

"Donnie?" Lizzie's voice, a small hand—developmentally behind for a ten-year-old, in opposition to that immense, strangely-oiled mind—plucking gently at his belt ties.

Raphi hurt . Why hadn't he thought of it? That was important. Important. Ambivalence… valence electrons, from one atom to another, binding miniature universes in intricate, infinite networks, unseen, all bonding to form dendrites and axons and electricity and his own brain, sending signals to explore the very signals themselves, on into eternity.

Should've freed Leo. He doesn't trust me anymore, anyways. Small choices, patterns of electricity over dendrites and axons, indecisive electrons, moving fancy free over his brain, origins unknown, potassium and sodium ions, from salts and bananas perhaps, but also somewhere else entirely, and he wasn't sure where.

"DONNIE!"

Don snapped his head up, out of cellular dreams unbidden, as a torrent of ungodly screams rent its way down the hallways toward them.

"Back into the vents!" he ordered, and Lizzie scrambled, barely getting her tiny fingers up into the nearest vent until Don pushed her forcefully upwards. He drew his bo, held the detonator with his finger safely off the button, as he hadn't fully calibrated them to blow all together yet.

A glimpse of an eyeless creatures, and still his mind struggled, torn between shoving it down and discovering its inner workings here and now, and jumping into the tunnels, into the here-and-now, into rescuing his brothers. He chose a middle path. It would continue to pursue them until it was negatively reinforced not to do so. Like a wild cat or a rodent in a maze, a small shock or bad-tasting food would train it to keep away—he would be that warning impetus.

"Donnie—don't, she's… she's… iron." Lizzie's voice shriveled into something weak and lifeless, falling upon old treads, rusted and dark and poisoned with trauma. Sick, repeated habits, walls formed of train tracks. It tickled Don's mind. Patterns of electrical execution, predestined by some small event. The death of a mother. The sight of a crime. The memory of the unfathomable. Or the unmemory.

Daphne Roberts marked her footsteps with maggots, writhing as with pain, and very well they should—poison and radiation and chemicals flowed through her veins, lifeblood. She was the artificial snack cake of the human species, containing few ingredients in common yet masquerading, badly and juicily, as a living being. Sightless, worms in silent agony nodding from black sockets, she felt her way along the deceptively immaculate walls.

Another inhuman scream and she—it—dove at him, clawed hands wet with oozing bodily juices—rancid sebaceous oils and stagnant water—and fastened around his arm. Don whirled, drove her back with his bo, yet couldn't stop his roving eyes, the calculators of his being, collecting data as rapidly as a hundred agents.

He could almost see and smell, among the bouquet of rotting organic matter and released methane gases from the gut, the ballet of cells dying with feeble cries and brought, unwilling, charged back into life,

to fade again, falling embers and ash. She was a mass of the living, the dying, and the dead, constantly fed and recycled.

An amazing being. He drove her off, but the warning never stuck, as though she were incapable of making new memories. Damaged, rotting brain tissue, hanging axons like telephone wires in a ruined city. This being was a universe, the space between one and zero, forever to be divided and studied. Same moves repeated again and again, like a madman, studying her movements through his own, rote and studied ninjitsu—even the long-ago learned, easy actions of walking, the smooth dance of muscles and signals. The monster was jerky, as though it had lost part of the motor control centers of the brain. Yet still… it… she… was amazing.

Donatello heard the rash of his own breathing, heard his own heartbeat, the rush of blood. Saw himself, constricted pupils.

It was then that he knew that he must destroy this thing.

And he was utterly…

Utterly, and completely…

Incapable of doing so.

The screams were attracting ninja to their position, and he had to get out of this situation and out of sight quickly—yet he experienced a sensation quite suddenly like the moment he had held a needle over his little brother's skin, so tantalizingly close to answers, to absolutions, to an end to something for which he was never quite sure of the beginnings.

Then he was on his shell, looking straight up at the vent opening and a small, pale face framed by wild auburn hair, before the eyes of Death bore down on him, maggots working away, burrowing busily in the flesh, eating and sowing, adding life to that mad veneer. Rotting, necrosis-inflamed teeth bit down into his shoulder, and he yelled out,

the smell of it filling his pores—before the teeth ripped away with a gasp.

Lizzie stood above him, quaking in her ball of clothing, holding his bo in threat towards the monster of her mother. Determined, stoic brown eyes. Donnie pulled himself to his feet, still gripping the detonator carefully.

The monster had rolled deftly off of him; with a strange hiss, it rebounded, struggling on ungainly limbs back to its feet, and Lizzie swung the bo again, like a baseball bat, hitting the thing squarely in the left cheek. The world seemed to slow, as the machine of Donatello's mind and the camera of Lizzie's both accounted the rotting head turn, around and around and around, until it faced in the opposite direction and snap, with a wet half-ripping sound, and hung down the back—attached by several veins and arteries and shreds of spinal cord. Like a broken automated doll, the creature jerked forward and back, took an incomplete step, and toppled onto twitching legs, landing in an impossible position, a rag toy, chest heaving for breath that had stopped long ago and would never come again.

Lizzie stood by, the bo useless at her side, her face expressionless—eyes unfathomable. Donnie had absolutely no words, and had a feeling that no words existed—so he scooped her up, sheathed his bo, and trotted away, back into the vents; when they were safely hidden near the prison cell area, he handed her a pile of the remaining explosives, and, in silence, they set them up. He could not put her family back together—he could only save his and offer her a place in it, in their hodgepodge collection of the accepted and the detritus of their world.

Donnie felt rather sure they were both deaf after the detonations ripped up a line of passageways, and the subsequent roar of alarms. In the confusion, he slipped down, threw a small smoke bomb in the line of an approaching group of Foot ninja, attacking through a screen of fog and blind confusion. More smoke bombs, more

confusion, yet he seemed no closer to his goal, and half the hallway had collapsed.

It felt like a year before he reached the cells, panting, his lungs on fire, his mind lighting through a thousand images—Lizzie, and the monster of her mother, and strange walls of water, and his brothers—his brothers—potassium and nitrogen and sodium, axons and dendrites, brown and blue eyes, beating hearts, systolic and diastolic, calculations and hope and the substantial and insubstantial, rocks and vapors, equations and love—and there were tears on his cheeks—and no logical process could tell him why. He could hear Lizzie creeping along, hidden and safe and silent above him—

Raphi hurt .

Like a voice from his childhood, *Raphi hurt* , Raphi was always hurt or silent or battling monsters, it seemed, always missing or a shadow yet somehow there, bleeding or crying or yelling, fighting with Mikey or huddling with Leo.

If they had met on the street, Donatello probably wouldn't give two shits about Raphael. The thought almost made his blood run cold, because someplace in his brain, with the voice of his father and his older brother and April, told him his life hinged on Raphael, yet his rational mind just couldn't always see why.

His breath stopped dead as he saw a door wide open, and he nearly ran into Leonardo, his eyes wide, walking gingerly out, Raphael hanging limply on his shoulder.

Honor and Acceptance

Author's Notes: Goddamn it took me forever to yank this godforsaken chapter out of me and get them out of the Foot headquarters FINALLY… seems like they've been there forever (and they have… ever since Ch 15 I've been writing two chapters for every one chapter, or almost, anyways). So for all you Salvation-lovers, enjoy. I wrote this instead of studying for my Shakespeare final (which is what I do best, bwhahahaha), and in a gesture of further procrastination, I think I'll go work on Ch. 19 or Dam Ch. 20. And if you haven't, please read "Umi no Uta"—it's got lots of great WTL back story and Splinter's perspective, which I think you'll all enjoy. Ch. 18 of Dam is also UP at my website. Feedback much appreciated!

Leo had not rocked his little brother in years, but he returned to the motion just as he returned to old kata—familiar and sweet, like lullaby, echoes from his past. Not resolved, but traveling out of ice again, at last. Raphael remembered. They could now deal with the consequences and decide what they were to one another.

Leo didn't realize he'd dozed off until a loud metallic clang, and the swishing sound of a door, snapped him into wakefulness.

A pail of water with a sponge rested a few feet from him—its bearer had disappeared in true ninja fashion, leaving him again alone with his unconscious sibling. His arms were cradling Raphael like a child, keeping his cracked shell off the ground, and he himself was leaning against the wall. Leo brought Raph's head closer under his jaw, listened to the calm, deep sound of his breathing.

The pail told him two things.

It said, possibly, that someone had been watching him; he accepted this idea, like many others, with a cool self-awareness, feeling an

odd confidence that nothing more could hurt him, ever again—that he was, somehow, once again in charge of his own Fate.

It also said that someone was coming to see him; explosions had rocked the corridor, and died down some time ago. His heart lifted as he suspected Donatello, and the further silence told him that his brother had most likely run into some opposition. Donnie was coming. But at the moment, someone far worse would be there first. He scooted forward and grabbed the pail—it seemed to him it had been left with him for the very reason the duffle bag had been: to take care of Raphael.

The pain killers had dissolved entirely by now and had thinned Raphael's blood considerably—the crack in his shell bleed profusely, leaving sharp, bright rivulets against glimmering, deceptive metal floors, darkening as the oxygen left the hemoglobin—Leo could hear Donatello's voice in his head— *put pressure on the wound, keep his torso elevated and gravity will work with you, instead of against—place him on his plastron if the bleeding won't stop—eventually the shell will clot, given the proximity of the spine* —and it lent him surprising strength. It battled with a child's voice in his head, asking him why he had overdosed Raphael—was it spite, or had he hoped, that in Raph's weakened, bleary state, he would hear the things he had craved for years? Raphael had been weak before, lying prone in a bathtub in a crumbling, groaning old farmhouse, and despite his constant vigil, Leo had never heard the confession, the remembrance—no inkling whatsoever that Raph believed he'd been wronged at his elder brother's hands. It was discomfiting, that Raphael, who spent most of his adolescent life rebelling against and spurning every one of *o-nii-san* 's orders, spent most of his emotional economy hiding Leo's wrongs from himself and their family. Leonardo's unsuspected guardian, the sponsor of his freedom and favoritism, who ironically chafed against it most. Walking contradictions, we.

Raphael's memories had been a balm, taking from off Leo's shoulders the immense weight of the greatest sin in his life, the

pressure of perfection, the need to endlessly atone, his obsession with rigid form, the mother and father of the Fearless Leader who expected more than could be given; they were the saint's prayers that brought him the sweet but danger-laced honey of salvation, the dark tunnel of coming years and hope almost imperceptible, far in the distance.

Leo wrung out his sponge, watching the rivulets of blood flow down his fingers, before washing his hand in the bucket, leaving them both clean.

Footsteps, in the metal hallway—not his brother's. The sound caused a crease to appear between Raph's eyes.

"Leo…?"

Leonardo blinked, held Raph a little closer. Footsteps in the hallway, coming closer. "Raph? How're you feeling?"

"Hmm… gotta… check the shop books… Casey order th'se mufflers ye'?"

Leo resisted the urge to laugh, almost hysterically, yet still nearly from joy. Raphael remembered. Nothing could harm him now. Such a strange correlation, the thing he had once been utterly terrified would happen—now he welcomed it, a breeze in dank, unmoving sewer tunnels, stale air on a moment he wished would die.

The door slid open.

Karai stepped in—she was no longer dressed for battle, but again in *hakama* , as during their first meeting after his and Raphael's third test. It seemed like a lifetime ago. Her demeanor was strong and resolute, high-chinned, and she made no mention of hers and Leonardo's near-death duel, the fact that he had broken into her headquarters, or his own haunted face. Instead, she nodded to Raphael, after kneeling.

"I left your brother's bag so you may tend to him, as you do not seem to trust my Foot medics. How are his injuries, Leonardo-san?"

The confidence refused to abate; Leo lent his head against the wall behind him, appraising his foe. "It's not the first time he's had a crack—he'll be fine once my brother Donatello has a look at him."

The comment had been pointed; a discomfited look passed over Karai's haughty, cold features. "Much animosity has passed between our families, Leonardo-san—an ambush two years ago nearly look your *otouto-san* 's life. The Foot has come close to killing your master, and your family has destroyed my father. Yet once dead, the vendetta is dissolved. I do no see why you would impede me from using whatever means I can to bring my father back."

"The Shredder was an evil man—we wouldn't have destroyed him otherwise. My family is not run by vendettas, Karai… my father would prefer it was run by love."

Glimmers of candlelight on the canvas of Leonardo's mind, the ring of children's voices, his father gathering them together for their baths, water heated over a flame in the winter months and a tattered rag—Donatello's eyes as he examined soap bubbles, Mikey's laughter as he threw suds at his brothers, Raphi's giggles, as Leo tickled him—

Raph's breathing, just below his chin, steady and strong and constant and the sound that had carried Leo over the waves of his life—breathing and breaths in darkness. Raphael, his strong brother.

Nothing to fear. His heart was whole.

Karai's eyes twinkled, icy and skeptical.

"My father told me stories, as I grew up—some pleasant, and others difficult, to teach me the nature of the world," she said, watching him sharply. "He told me of a pair of twins born, one with its caul and the cord wrapped around its neck. It had remained smaller than its

brother, gasping for breath, and grew up an idiot, unable to speak. The healthy twin was forced to take care of him, keep him out of danger, and had dreams at night of strangling his brother. Their parents, frightened, look the twins to a priestess, who drew forth the spirits of their past lives—a married couple, who died when the husband, mad with jealousy, killed his wife by wrapping a rope around her neck, and killing himself thereafter. In the womb, they remained caught inside this moment, acting it out once again, so that the older twin wrapped the umbilical cord and made a burden of his brother, birthing suffering out of suffering. This is the suffering of lives directed through love, a pain of passion, Leonardo-san. I do what I do through love—an ugly thing to your eyes, but you are no better."

Leo felt himself smile. "My past is dark, Karai, and my future darker, but I know that I can kneel before my father with honor now, and the truth will out. But you? You have honor, even if your father doesn't. How would you kneel before him, when he stopped governing his life with love a long time ago—you, who kidnapped a child, ripped a family apart and made a go at mine—after the poison, the *youkai* , your dirty tricks—how could you justify it to yourself in the end?"

Karai remained silent, allowing the quiet to gather in the corners of the room like mist, to crawl on Leo's skin.

"I would have my father, Leonardo-san. That would be enough."

Leo felt a trickle of compassion negotiate its way back into his veins. "But would you really wish on your father the same kind of half-life Daphne Roberts is cursed with? Mindless, living and dying continuously, falling apart a little more with every regeneration? It wouldn't be living—you're a fool if you think you can give him life in the way those twins were reborn."

Karai paused, squinting at him. "You are the twins in my father's tale—the healthy that strangles, the infirm that slowly dies, as two chain links, one gold, the other steel, who are pulled apart by great forces."

A hand unseen, cold claws, squeezed Leo's heart. He had indeed been watched—this fact he had been perfectly willing to accept—but the way in which she expressed it, the beauty of the ballet of words, the predestined archetypal nature he seemed to have possessed, foredoomed to kill his brother—too much. He was Leonardo, not a twin from a story about reincarnated lovers dead in a jealous murder-suicide. So romantic an idea, when he—they—were a pair of mutants whose childhood romance had carried through filthy caverns, over mounds of trash and societal detritus, algae and cockroaches, frogspawn and dead pigeons and the smell of offal, watching humans kissing through twisted grids and on mud-smeared magazine pages. Karai's world was one of honor and structure—she was human and belonged somewhere, in something made by thousands of generations before her. Leonardo existed in a pocket, unprecedented, blundering, accidental.

"I… I am not a link or a jealous lover from one of your father's human stories," Leo said, and his voice was a chill whisper; he leaned forward, cradling his brother. "You and I may share a lot in common… I may speak your languages and watch your TV shows and practice the same martial arts, appreciate art by Renaissance painters and swords by Japanese artisans… but what you've seen here, Karai—you have no way of understanding. I may see your world, but you don't see mine. I can guess much about your life, but mine, Karai…you have no idea. To live in freezing sewers, to survive off what humans throw away, to understand the world through small snatches of information, incomplete books. To never see anyone but your brothers and your father—and to know you will know hardly anyone outside those people all your life—is far beyond your petulant need to have your father back.

"You can keep us, but you'll never get the girl. She translated into our world; and even though we can give her back to yours, we still understand what it was she went through. We're ghosts and shadows to you, but we should protect our own. So my honor and your honor, Karai, will always have to be different; we serve different masters, and different realities."

Leo had never before seen the unshakable demeanor of Karai crack apart; taken aback, she rocked onto her feet again, staring down at him. The common ground, the intimacy of honorable swordsmen, crumbled under them, leaving them isolated and estranged on newly defined islands—islands that had in fact always been there, but that they had shouted over the expanse to each other, with the lie that Leo and his family often fell into. But they weren't humans because they couldn't be treated as humans, and had not grown up as humans, the way humans do. Similar, perhaps—but the world they knew and the world above them had too little, and too much, in common. They were refuse, tumbling shadows, fading through the Earth.

"I… The child… She is your claim, Leonardo-san. We shall not—the Foot shall not…" Her face changed, hardened over the surprise, the unease, the shifting of her paradigms. "Our time is over. Protect your brother."

Karai swept out. She did not close the door behind her.

Leo looked on, almost in disbelief; Raphael shifted in his arms.

"Tha' wuz… f-fuckin' brave, bro…" he mumbled, striving not to be incoherent.

Leo swallowed, almost unconscious of the thread he had, Atropos-like, cut from his life, and trying to avoid the thought, pulled Raph's arm around his shoulders, to hoist him up.

"She left us a way out. I'm gonna need your help, little brother."

He felt Raph nod, heard him grunt as he rallied his strength and consciousness, and helped him, one unit, until they stood, Raphael leaning heavily on his shoulder.

Footsteps again in the hallway outside—calloused flesh on metal, moving quickly, panting, a drawn-in breath as in surprise.

"D-Donnie…" Raph mumbled, a small smile touching him. "His timin' is fantastic 's usual…"

Leo refrained from the stupid grin battling with his facial muscles, and stumbled forward into the doorway, almost colliding with their brother, who stopped, eyes wild.

"You're both okay—who left the door open?"

Leo resituated Raph a little more comfortably. "I don't know how okay Raph is, but Karai left the door open. I'm not sure where Mikey is."

"Where's Liz?" Raph asked, voice sounding stronger. Don pulled Raph's other arm up onto his own shoulder and tipped his brother's head up to see a vent above them; Raphael blinked at it, clearing his unfocused eyes, to see a small, pale face gazing down at him.

"Raphi!"

He swallowed, focused, and smiled at her. "Hey, kid. Wha's the haps?"

Lizzie made a movement as to drop down and join them, but Don have her a halting gesture.

"We'll be up there in a minute, once we get Mikey," he said, a strange tone in his voice—Leo realized it was his own tone, the tone of *o-nii-san* . Don looked at him next, and his voice returned to its normal cadence: scientist, adviser, introvert, deferential. "There's another locked cell next to yours. All the others look open."

Leo's eyes widened. "That's—that's impossible. Why didn't he yell or anything? Unless the walls are sound-proof, he would've known we were in there"—

"He's… he… covered in blood, Leo… pro'ly freaked out…" Raph said, now looking down and growing heavier.

A voice disturbed them, making Don and Leo jump.

"WILL YOU DUDES STOP TALKING AND GET THE PRINCESS OUT OF THE TOWER PLEASE?"

Raph chuckled, a half-asleep gesture. "Or not… good ol' Mikey…"

Don left Raph to Leo and trotted over to the next cell door, using his PDA to start in on the lock combinations on the side panel; after a cursory few moments in which he looked like he was working out a particularly uncomplicated Rubix cube, the door slid open with a whoosh.

Michelangelo stood in the doorway, splattered in blackened blood, much changed; his eyes twinkled, however, with a glimmer of his old humor.

"This prison thing all part a' your bondage fantasies, Donnie-boy?"

Don stood still for a second; after a moment, he smiled and pulled Mikey toward him by the neck, leaned him over, and noogied him mercilessly.

Once Mikey escaped, he sent a glance at Raph and Leo, and froze. The gaze was all Leo needed to know that Mikey had become part of the conclusion they had reached in their prison, part of the splatter of blood they had both felt long ago, knew the smell of it and the sound of crushed skulls, the feeling of gray matter as it showered your face. Raph lifted his eyes, to meet Mikey's, hanging there, questioning—Mikey drew forward, as though pulled by a string, and embraced his brother, pulling him upward—as though out of a quagmire—and holding him there.

"Hey, big bro…" he whispered, but could say no more—it was all he needed to say. Raph's grip on him tightened, as though seized. Mikey turned his eyes on Leo, something strange flitting underneath them.

"Leo—what you said to Karai—I… yeah," Mikey stammered, and Leo grasped his hand for a second. A laugh sounded above them.

"Mikey need a bath," Lizzie said, smiling. A conundrum, as ever. Mikey rubbed the back of his neck in embarrassment, grinning slightly.

Don walked forward and took Mikey and Leo's arms. He had been silently watching them, slightly outside the strange resolution they drew towards. "We better get Raph outta here. I know Karai let you go, but I don't trust those Foot ninja any further than I can throw fifty of them at once."

Leo nodded. "Agreed. Mike, you get up into the vents and pull—Don and I will lift him up to you."

"'m not luggage," Raph muttered, an eye slit open. Mikey clapped him gently on the shoulder.

"'course not! Didn't turtle hide suitcases go out in the fifties?"

"Smart ass."

He slipped into the vents, grinning at Liz—with some pushing and pulling and help from Raph, they had their brother up and out of the passageways, and slipped away—out of Foot headquarters and down into the sewers—home.

Hikari no Dansu

Author's Note: Whoa, I just realized this chapter is actually big. I hope you all enjoy and that it was worth the wait. As you all should know, the corresponding Dam chap to this one is "Umi no Uta"—by this point there is a decided gap between them, and that breach will continue to widen as we go along. Special thanks to all my reviewers, and to the people who hopped over and read the chapter I guest wrote in Kyt's *What is Inevitable* , titled "Speak of the Devil." The chap will also be posted on my site as a standalone at some point. And while we're on the subject, go read by beta/fandom wife/cowriter/ fellow Tart, Kyt (Kytyngurl2)—she's amazing. If you like my stuff, you'll love her family interactions and Raph angst. Also thanks to Tori Angeli for giving me some late-night feedback on this chap—her fic *Eighteen Minutes* is a must-read. Reviews loved, snugged, framed, and appreciated… especially now that I'm depressed after looking at grad school requirements…. Three languages for Berkeley, God help me.

Hikari no Dansu: Dance of Light

Warm water was something their family had never taken for granted, and something Donatello had in his power to give.

As children, Splinter had taken them every two days to an underground shower room, one used and abandoned by sewage workers, but which still drew warm water after some patience and tinkering with various handles. In the winter months, the old pipes froze and spewed rusted, icy water, so Splinter would gather the cleanest he could find in a bucket, bring it back to his burrow, and warm the water over a small flame outside the door, and scrub his cold-blooded sons down, before wrapping them in blankets to keep them from shivering. They loved water but dreaded the cold, the long-lasting claw that drove into their hearts and made them suddenly sleepy and sluggish, impeding their play.

When Donatello was ten, he was handed a book he'd mentioned an interest in by Raphael—a tome about piping and gas heating. Raph had had little clue why Don wanted it, only that he did, and one day tumbled in, grinning, after a long romp in the trash heaps, presenting the prize. Donnie had later spied his little brother watching in interest as he began assembling the many differently-shaped pipes and gadgets he'd found or sent his brothers in search of, until one day Donatello turned the faucet on the claw-footed bathtub they'd found years earlier, which they had hitherto always filled with heated water of their own making, and liquid poured out, and began to steam up the bathroom. Beside it was an immense metal bin, which clunked and clinked and shuddered, heating large amounts of water for the kitchen and tub—and since then the winters had been warm, pleasant, and far better than they had ever been. Since then Raphael had become a rather remarkable plumber—never afraid to get his hands dirty—and had even taught Don a few tricks in his day.

And since then, that tub had seen an amazing amount of hot blood as well.

The water had turned a brackish bronze color, as Donatello scrubbed blood out of the many cracks and gouges in Raphael's shell. He'd kept the liquid lukewarm, to stop Raph's blood from moving too freely—and now the innovation which the two of them had brought to their family and both helped to maintain was the instrument of Donatello's craft, the instrument of Raphael's healing.

"Now I have to cement the thing again"—

"Sorry, Don," Raph mumbled for the four-hundredth time, his voice monotone. "Not like I did it on freakin' purpose."

"You're such a handful, it's amazing you're still alive"—

"It's just a dent!"

"If it was just a dent I could take your shell off like a car door and bang it out."

Raph chuckled. "Be my guest."

"Hilarious," Don muttered, steaming. "I'm sure this is all one great joke to you, now you got to play hero"—

"Oh, yeah—I jus' love gettin' the shell kicked outta me"—

"More like *into* you, actually."

"Whatever. I might as well go find the Foot and say, 'Please, sir, may I have another?'"

"No one's stopping you, though Leo might direct his bondage jokes towards you instead of me from now on."

"Well, we sure's hell can't have that," Raph said, then glanced at the closed bathroom door. "Take yer time, though—you couldn't pay me t' be out there wi' the two a' them right now."

Donatello scrubbed a bit more meticulously. "Don't worry, we'll be awhile. And even if we weren't, I don't want to be out there any more than you do."

"Mikey's gonna have t' take a shower eventually."

"He can use the kitchen sink," Don said, distractedly.

"Gross," Raph muttered, grinning. "How ya holdin' up, Liz?"

Lizzie poked her head up, sitting on the toilet lid cross-legged, mixing a small batch of cement, hiding with them from the oldest and youngest brothers. She had remained productive, active, and helpful every second since they had emerged from the vents, aiding Raph, opening sewer lids, removing impediments from their path, grabbing supplies for Don—she sensed the odd tension between Leo and Mikey, which craved resolution, just as keenly as the middle siblings had. Donatello had said nothing about their encounter with Daphne Roberts, and turned his thoughts away from the fascinating creature, away from wonderings as to her—its—survival, focusing on his little

brother. Should his mind wander to it again, he would see electrons, dendrites and axons, feel the pull to his degenerating samples, pondering when the process would end and the matter finally decompose entirely. Until then, he would never be released.

"Cement almost done," she commented, holding up the bowl. "Raphi okay?"

"Raphi drugged," Raph said, smiling. "Raphi very drugged."

"Raphi lucky he's not in a coma," Don commented, grunting as he pulled Raph up to push against the crack and make it less concaved.

Liz blinked, studying them. "Raphi use his mind—feel better by thinking."

Raphael almost giggled. "Mind over matter… Splinter'd be so proud."

Don chuckled. "More like painkiller overdose over matter, but have it your way. I'll never know what possessed you to take so many."

"I tol' Leo I usually take one, but 'e gave me three… he wuz makin' sense at the time an' I wasn't feeling too good, so I took 'em…"

Don stopped moving, alerting Raphael and making him turn slowly around, realizing he'd said something he shouldn't have.

"I mean, he doesn't know much 'bout painkillers, y'know? He"—

"Leo overdosed you?" Don appeared disturbed, the eyes wavering.

"He… he didn't know. It's not a big deal," Raph said, his voice slightly defensive; he could feel Lizzie's gaze, bouncing between the two of them.

Normally, Donatello would have seen through the defensive turn of voice, thrown away Raph's half-assed denials—but when it came to Leo—when it came to his older brother—when it came to *o-nii-san* —

"Yeah… he doesn't know."

Raph watched Don for a moment, quietly, seemingly coming to a conclusion, before he turned back around, and allowed his brother to continue his ministrations. It was the nature of the rift between them — *o-nii-san* standing silently in the aperture, unhealing, a wound untended and deep, scabbed over but ever there. Impossible to bridge the breach, as they had no language in common, and had never needed one.

" *Hey, Donnie… you busy?"*

" *Can't you tell, Raphi? I'm reading."*

" *You're always reading."*

" *I like reading."*

" *I know."*

" *Well, did you need something?"*

" *N-no."*

" *Then… then what is it?"*

" *N-nothing."*

" *Are you stuttering again? If Master Splinter hears that, he's going to think you've been sucking on your hand."*

" *S-stop, Donnie, n-no one c-cares."*

" *You better not start crying again, or Leo'll be mad."*

" *I d-don't care! You're such a j-jerk, D-Donnie!"*

" *How am I a jerk? I'm just trying to help you!"*

" *You're n-not h-helping! And I'm n-not… n-not…"*

" *Stuttering?"*

" *I CAN SAY IT, DONNIE!"*

" *Stop yelling!"*

" *I'll yell if I w-want t-to—you're n-not the boss of m-me!"*

" *I'm older than you, for one—and if you yell, people are gonna think you're crazy."*

" *I'm n-not crazy."*

" *I never said you were."*

" *Then who're these p-p-people who'll think I'm c-crazy?"*

" *Just… people. Master Splinter and Leo and Mikey, I suppose."*

" *But n-not you, Donnie?"*

" *Sometimes I have my doubts."*

" *Like… like w-when?"*

" *Like… jeez, why are we talking about this? Aren't you supposed to be working on your kata with Leo?"*

" *What're you reading?"*

" *Something I found. Maybe you should go work with Leo so you don't get in trouble, Raphi."*

" *Where did you find it?"*

" *Raphi, I'm READING, why are you trying to be so annoying? Did Mikey put you up to this?"*

" *God, Donnie, I'm not TRYING to be annoying anyways!"*

" *Well, good for you, you finally found something you're good at without trying—congratulations."*

In his weaker moments, it still made Don wince, to think of the sudden shocked, pained look on Raphael's young face—his untalented, lackluster little brother, who lived in the shadow of a swords master, a genius, and a massively outgoing, creative, and funny Michelangelo.

Donnie felt there had been something somehow prophetic about their names… Leonardo and Michelangelo were considered the greatest artists of their day, masters of their art in skill and imaginative hand; Donatello, less well known, had left behind a much more hidden legacy of architectural marvels and innovation echoing into the present through the mind of invention. Raphael Sanzio was a man out, a name known less for the artist and better for the angel. In *Paradise Lost* , he had been the seraphim who condescended to eat with Adam and Eve and inform them about the creation of the cosmos, the war in heaven, and the fall of Satan—he had supped with mortal humans, while other angels sat in their lofty towers, occupying a place between worlds. His name meant "God heals," and once upon a time, Donnie's brother had been a healer himself; and like an angel, fallen. He was mediocre, unstable, often a weak link, a puzzle yet simpleminded. Donatello could tinker with bodies and make them work again… but he had never seen himself as a healer. He could never soothe the problems beneath the skin, cure the origin of his family's ills.

He had always liked to think that everyone had a purpose, that the universe was inherently functional; he would like to think that healing was Raph's place, and that, when he finally grew up, he would discover it. But Donnie couldn't help but wonder, in his weaker moments, if Raphael's sole purpose was just to test the rest of them.

A loud thump made them both jump, and made Lizzie's head swing up like a hunted animal. Someone—Leo or Mikey—had pounded

their fist into the kitchen table.

"Christ," Raph muttered under his breath. "I really hope that was Mikey."

"I sure don't—Mikey angry is a nightmare on legs."

"Better than stomach on legs."

Don found himself laughing. "He'll be that when he's done fighting. Like the girls who make themselves feel better with a gallon of ice cream."

"I've got him from here."

Leo and Don supported Raph until they'd made it in the den door and halfway through the living room, where Don took control and led his little brother into the bathroom. Lizzie, with a small look at Mikey and Leo, slunk silently after him. The bathroom door shut. The sound of the shower. Leo took a deep breath, and gazed around, half expecting Master Splinter to emerge and ask them why they'd snuck out. It seemed he couldn't get fully used to their sensei's non-presence. He sat down at the kitchen table; Mike remained standing, watching his movements.

"You know," Leo commented, trying to sound as causal as possible, "none of us really knew you were angry about anything until you blew up. Seems like a dangerous way to handle things."

Mikey appraised him—it was a look that took Leo by surprise, but then, Mike was taking him by surprise a lot lately.

"Dangerous, dude? You're the one who wanted Raph in that costume again."

"Sometimes," Leo said rather wisely, "one must return to the moment of a defeat to deal with it."

Mike narrowed his eyes. "Stop trying to sound like Splinter, Leo. Freakin' hypocrite."

Leo smiled wryly. "And how is that?"

Mikey made a short, frustrated motion, before he regained control of himself, visibly reining in something he'd been wanting to say.

Leo folded his arms. "Go ahead and say it. I'm a big boy."

Mikey paced for a moment, glazed with confliction.

"I couldn't hear everything you guys were sayin', Leo, and I'm glad I couldn't, but… y'know, I'm not blind. I remember, four years ago, when Raph started gettin' the way he is—I mean, *was* , he's a lot better lately—and I… I mean, Donnie'n I talked about it, an' maybe we don't agree, an' maybe cuz he's smarter he's right, but… Don thinks you're the greatest thing since sliced pizza. An' you're big brother an' everything, an' I don't wanna think you ever did somethin' bad, but… but… I'm not blind, Leo. The more you try to be perfect, the more I can tell—you did somethin' bad to Raph. I've never said anything, so it's sorta… I mean, I'm sorta part of it, an' maybe Donnie is too—maybe all of us are. I won't pretend like I was a good bro either, but I never tried to say I was perfect… I've been nasty to Raph most of my life, mostly cuz I was… I… I mean, you guys… an' after whatever you did, he was like my best friend, he finally paid attention to me, and there's always you takin' him away… I guess sometimes I can't stand the two've you. The way you fight. The way you obsess over each other. Makes me crazy, but I jus' make it so I don't care. It's easier that way. I get mad for five seconds and then I stop caring, an' go play video games. Live and let live, y'know, dude?"

Leo took a calming breath. "You're… you mean, you've been jealous? All Raph and I have been doing is fight for the last four years."

"That's better than not mattering. Everything he does has to do with you. You're all he thinks about—he wants your approval'r something."

Leo blinked; he knew this in his heart, but it still seemed new to hear it. "It's nice to know that somebody cares about what I think."

Mikey brought his fist down suddenly into the table, making Leo sit down. "We ALL want your approval, Leo! Raph always denies wantin' what he wants most—he went the whole time you were gone sayin' he hoped you never came back, and sayin' we didn't need you, and he didn't need you, and that he didn't care about you—an' I *know* what it's like to be little brother an' left behind, dude! It… it just sucks!"

Leo rubbed his temples. "Mikey"—

Michelangelo narrowed his eyes. "It's Mike, Leo."

Leo stood, his eyes disturbed "Don't do that."

Mikey sneered slightly. "Why, Leo? Remind you a' something?"

Leo swallowed, and sat back down, composing himself. "Mike, you might think that just because I'm the oldest, I don't get how hard it is for you guys to sit at home while I get sent off for training—but I answer to Splinter, and everything he does is for the greater good of this family, and I have faith in that. I only stayed away so long because I… I failed against the ninja council, and I felt like I was missing the point in the jungle. I had trouble with the lessons, 'humility' and 'community'… I was too proud, and too convinced I was the best, on my own, and that the human world was just too ugly to be saved."

Mike snorted. "Save your emo bull, Leo. We don't have too many demands, livin' down here—we joke about it, but we could live without pizza an' TV an' monster movies—we lived ten years with

nothin' but rice an' cold water. I jus' don't think you get that we want you around."

Leo blinked. "I thought you just said you hate it when I come around and Raph stops paying attention to you."

Mike sighed and rubbed the back of his own neck. "Yeah… but I hate seein' him miserable even more. Jus'… jus' don't tell him that, dude."

Leo folded his arms, suppressing a grin. "Well, well. So maybe he *is* something more than just your hero, Mike. Doesn't explain why you teased him to tears growing up, though."

Michelangelo appeared suddenly tired. "I dunno why either… just easy, I guess. You guys always thought I was so funny. An' Raph always got so worked up."

Leo matched his fatigue. "Being cruel is easy, Mike. I know better than anyone."

Mike glared at him for a minute. "I guess you're gonna leave me to figure out what happened, right?"

Leo looked away. "I'll give most anything for this family, Michelangelo. But me and Raph have something in common—there are some things that belong only to us. You can have our lives, but not our selves."

He could've swore that Mikey pouted for a moment, before looking tired again, and rather a lot older. "Whatever. I have a pretty good idea. Nice to see you kissed and made up."

They sat and stood, an invisible form between them, as ever. It was the nature of their relationship, too far apart, in priority and life philosophy.

" *How you doin', Mommy Leo?"*

" *I'm trying to meditate, Michelangelo."*

" *Master Splinter wants you to do the dishes."*

" *That's Raphi's job."*

" *Nurse Raphi's PMSing, he can't do it."*

" *Knock it off, Mikey, I'm not in the mood."*

" *I wasn't makin' fun of you, what's the biggie?"*

" *It's just… annoying. What's wrong with him now?"*

" *Nothing."*

" *What did you do?"*

" *It's just that dumb closet thing I pulled last week. I said something and he got all butt-hurt an' went crying to Master Splinter."*

" *So you do the dishes, you're the one who did it."*

" *Master Splinter says it was your fault—you were there."*

" *And you're fine with that, huh? This's why I hang out with Raphi."*

" *Whatever. Not like you didn't laugh. An' Raphi an' Don think you're so cool . "*

Mike began to walk away, but paused, as the bathroom door opened. Don let the air in, helping Raph out with his little cement mixer in tow, before sitting them all down at the kitchen table. He watched his brothers apprehensively for a moment, while Raph cringed. Mike's carriage altered immediately.

"Hey, kiddo. What's the haps?"

Liz held up the spoon, dripping globules of cement. "Mixing. Raphi hurt."

As though reminded, Mike sat down next to Raph, who was keeping his head rather low.

"S'up, Mikey?"

Mikey patted him on an undamaged part of his shell. "You're gettin' pretty good at this bangin' up business—guess it's lucky for me you never drive the van."

"Now, now, Mikey," Don said, as he began cementing, "Raph's great with the vehicles. He just can't seem to keep himself out of fender benders."

Raph groaned slightly. "Yeah, yeah."

Leo tapped the table. "Tease him when he's not falling apart, huh?"

"How sweet," Mikey said in a sing-song voice. "Raphi and Leo sittin' in a tree, K-I—OW, LEO!"

Leo remained frowning at him sternly, after a sharp thwap to the head.

"So not funny, Mikey," Raph mumbled. "Ah, jeez, Donnie—whatcha doin' back there?"

Don had gone at one of the deeper cracks with a small metal pick, in fact, and was holding his tongue between his teeth. "Pulling out the smaller shell fragments, dirt, cement, and glass, from the looks of it. You're a mess… as usual."

Lizzie sat down, cross-legged, and gazed quizzically at Donatello. "Raphi save me."

Don sighed. "Yeah. Raphi just… frustrating."

Raph smiled wryly. "Yeah, an' I didn't save yeh, kid. Donnie did. I jus' smacked a couple a' ninjas around."

Leo stood; he placed a hand on Raph's shoulder and paced away, disappearing into the dojo.

Meditation. Replacing candles. Sweeping up fragments of dripped wax, watching the stalactites melted off table edges and frozen, off-white. The broom, swept into the east, sweeping away the evil, sweeping away his thoughts. A sprinkle of salt on the *tatami* mats, checking the tins of *sencha* green tea, powdering *matcha* , taking down the dried jasmine from inside some old, heavy volumes, grinding them down and adding them to an airtight container—jasmine to calm the nerves, green tea for contemplation, if he could hear himself think over the many other selves clambering for his attention within. Sweeping the dust from Master Splinter's low table, from off the little wooden box where four medals lay—awards of mastery, presented and unpresented, side-by-side, some kinetic and others only potential. Sweeping the dust to the east, to be eaten by the rising sun. To the east, where his father would find it, and swipe it away like a bothersome gnat.

Leo knelt, to a presence made known only by its absence, on the other side of the table. It pained him as the thought crept, like the frost, into his shell—someday he would climb the insurmountable, and rest on the other side of that table, and he finally knew it, fully, then, staring at the shadow of his unseen father. Someday, his relationship to his brothers would have to change forever. He would become Master Hamato Leonardo, *o-nii-sama* , the *shishou* , the leader of this family and this dojo; he would grieve his father, and he would grieve alone, sitting on a lonely tier above his siblings. It seemed impossible that he had chosen this, but chosen it he had—it ran through the multiplicitous streams that made up the laminated soil of himself.

To go from that thirteen-year-old child, who dreamt of nothing but his brother lying by his side, gazing out at unattainable sunlight, to the master…

Unattainable sunlight.

" *Missed me, missed me!"*

" *Now I gotta kiss you?"*

" *Ha! Missed again!"*

Sweep the evil to the east…

His knuckles were growing pale green.

" *I just wanted him to like me…"*

Honey eyes, dark depths, surface reflecting golden sunlight.

" *Is there something wrong with that?"*

Raphael may not want to have been stuck in that moment, but Leo could not escape it… it screamed to burst out of him, to be known… in his confidence, it seemed nothing could hurt him ever again—so why not make it known? Why not drag it out of the shadows, stop it from being that unspoken secret? But like a child given succor beside his heart, he had nourished it close to himself, his secret, his possession.

Unattainable sunlight, refracting in bright, short-lived flashes…

He opened his eyes and he was lying in a tunnel, dry in the summer sun filtering down through a grid—foot traffic passed above them. Raphi pointed at a woman decked to the nines in leopard print.

"And that one's rushin' to the hospital cuz her heels froze her feet in the tippy-toe position, and she can't bear to show up to her podiatrist like that cuz she's got this massive crush on him. Your turn!"

"Her *podiatrist* ? Where d'you *get* this stuff?"

"Donnie," Raphi replied, with a grin. "He's like a jukebox of crazy, long words that no one needs. I mean, why not call it a foot doctor? And why all these phobia names? Why not just say, 'fear of spiders'?

It's actually shorter and makes more sense to everybody than arachnophobia, right?"

Leo chuckled. "Too bad the dictionaries are run by Donnies and not Raphis, Raphi. Japanese makes more sense, *totemo subarashii* ."

Raphi grinned. " *Mucho* , *très logicale* , Leo- *sempai* ."

"Sempai? That's for schools, Raphi."

"We're in school. The dojo's like school, right? And you always lead us through warm-ups and katas, so that makes you sempai." He said it without relish, only cold, hard sense.

Leo blinked, and looked back out at the passerby. He pointed to a rather corpulent man in a suit, checking his watch.

"That guy's cheating on his wife with a secretary and he's checking how long his alibi will last. Little does he know the secretary is planning his murder if he refuses to marry her without a pre-nup"—

"You're so weird, Leo," Raphi chuckled. "What's a pre-nup?"

Leo grinned at him. "It was on one of sensei's soaps—it's this paper people sign before they get married about how they'll split up their stuff if they ever separate."

Raphi blinked for a moment. "Oh. That's kinda… scary. She'd kill him just cuz he wanted her to sign some paper about stuff?"

"I dunno, it was on the soap opera, so I guess so. Some humans are bad like that."

Raphi licked his lips. "I know… I watch the news with Master Splinter sometimes. Lots of stabbings and shootings and this other one, evisceration"—

Leo stopped his words with a kiss. Raphi eagerly answered it, lying on his side—he drew back and came in again, after looking at Leo's

face for half a second.

Heaven in the light touching of lips, gentle caresses in a life of brothers tumbling, fighting and punching, every touch accompanied by pain, the lessons of the tough—now feather-light over the arms, the ghost of a stroke, Raphael stealing his breath, nibbling his bottom lip

Had it happened, or was it a product of his fantasies, a hybrid of both, bastard child of his mind and memory?

Leo drew away slowly from the kiss; when he opened his eyes, savoring the feeling, he found himself back in the dojo, kneeling among sunless cold drafts, his dream vanished, and Raphael was no longer twelve, but almost seventeen, on his knees facing him—apparition, a blink of dreams, memory's tricks, an old man's folly, a mere figment of a long meditation, from which he must learn a lesson?

"Raph…"

"Leo," Raph said; his eyes had a steely resolve. How long had Leo been sitting here, staring at Master Splinter's empty place—the place he must someday occupy? "It's uh… you should have some breakfast."

"Raph, I have to… you're… no, that's not the right word…" How to say such a thing in English, when his internal dialogue, in shadowy moments, shifted into that hybrid speech, their secret language. "You're… *kirei na* ." He heard the inflection as it warbled off his own tongue, the unstressed music—he sounded beautiful to his own ears. Truth was beautiful.

Raphael blinked at him. Leo must have been gone for hours, as Raph no longer appeared half-asleep, unable to focus himself—he was, instead, sharp and purposeful, but allowing Leo to say his fill.

" *Kirei* ? My Japanese ain't so good anymore, Leo—but I don't think"—

Leo reached up, grasping his brother's shoulder.

"Clean. You're clean. Everything you ever did back then… it was innocent, and… and you really were my best friend. I couldn't've had a better one."

Raph's eyes drifted from Leo's heartbroken face to Splinter's absence, the ghost that haunted their steps and slicked their mental pathways.

"I can't be your friend. You got this whole life you're steppin' into, and you got the blueprints laid out for yourself. I'd only be in yer way—no matter what the two've us wanted. What we want… doesn't matter. Never has."

Leo searched that depth of dark honey, trapped sunshine in an oubliette. "And what d'you want, Raphael?"

"That… I mean, that belongs t' me, bro."

Leo felt himself smile; he was suddenly sure that something in him had indeed broken, though blissfully so—a broken piece in his wholeness. Broken silence. He drew their faces closer.

"You belong to me, Raphael. You always will, so long as I'm alive. You'd lay your life down at my feet, and you've already made me a gift of your sanity and your soul. You're a loyal person, after all—aren't you? For all the raging you do against me, now matter how much you run away—you always come back. A… bird… in the hand…"

"Stop." Raph's eyes were clear. "Leo… you were innocent too. Jus' cuz you know now… I mean, don't expect… jus' 'cause you seemed so old back then, doesn't mean you really knew any better than me. You were jus' better at makin' it look like you did." He again looked at

that glaringly empty place, screaming silence, flashing darkness. He saw what his twin could see, an old connection descried from the bottom of immobile wells. "You'll be there someday, an' me… I'll still be over here, bro. I'm always gonna be backin' you up, but you gotta know… I'm not your friend. I'm your brother. No matter what I want, no matter what *you* want. You'll keep blamin' yerself forever—that's why… that's why… Leo—we gotta"—

Leo's hand dropped numbly. His voice sounded foreign to his own ears—deep, chill, dread. "No. It'd… I mean… it'd *kill* him to know…"

The resolve refused to melt from Raphael's eyes, joined by pain and something like guilt. "I shoulda told him back then, Leo—I thought he'd punish you and split us up. It was stupid… I mean, you needed help just as much's I did. Maybe you're the one who led the show, but I… I mean… I let it happen. I let myself forget. I let you take it all, and I let myself become… *this* . But before you even start thinkin' about takin' that place, we gotta put this to rest. We gotta tell Master Splinter—if he ever comes home."

Leo swallowed, allowed Raph to grasp his hand tightly for a second before releasing it. "And if he doesn't?"

Raph sighed—a massive, truly weary sound, shuddering and deep. "We'll tell Mike and Don the whole story. They both have some half-assed idea… we'll just get ridda the myths, start over."

Leo's eyes grew far away. "Start over? No… there's no starting over. We're brothers, we became a family—there's no starting over 'til we die, Raph."

Til we die .

Death is not an option for *o-nii-san* . Unless it is the only way in which he may atone.

Leo blinked, disturbed by a sudden thought and its ensign, a shudder.

"We'll… we'll tell Master Splinter. I'll atone before I'm head of this family—no matter what."

Raph watched him for a long moment, a slight frown between his eyes. They clasped hands in the air for a long moment, lingering in the heat trapped within the gesture.

Then it was gone, and they were alone, ensnared in respective mirror worlds, haunted by separate thoughts. Slathered in cold beds, able to hear the other's breathing but alone nevertheless, they lingered before the fall, poised on the cliff. Soon the secret would no longer belong to them. Leo let Raph pull him up, towards breakfast; he pushed down the urge to keep him in the dojo longer, to speak to him alone for as much time as possible, to stretch out the sanctuary indefinitely.

A flash, unattainable sunlight, pigeons flying into the sun, the cry of the mockingbird. Raphael was looking back at him. Leonardo wished he could freeze that image forever, an impression of light refracted upon the film of his eyelids. A moment of innocence. Unattainable sunlight… the only thing he had ever truly wanted for himself. A tendril of scent, the after-essence of memory, a shade of déjà vu—he blinked, and he is lying on the floor of a tunnel again, resting beside a friend whose eyes reflect his own, gazing into the hot fire of an untouchable star—warmth that bathes him still.

First Light

Author's Note: Salvation ch. 20 at last! I am SO sorry this chapter took *forever* ; Fall quarter began at UCLA and it's been kicking my ass ten ways from Sunday. I hope this chap is worth it. Also, Damnation 20 is UP at my website—and please, please, if you read it and would like to do so, make a comment at the end of this chapter to that effect. Dam is a rather lonely story, and I don't get much feedback for it outside friends. Please know that Dam 20 is NOT for the faint of heart, and I warned you. This is the third or second-to-last chap before the epilogue. Sniff... I can't believe it's almost over! But in the interim, I have been working on a project that should be a pleasant surprise to WTL readers, so keep your eyes out once WTL is complete. Please enjoy and feedback is MUCH appreciated.

A month, an eternity of empty, wondering, listless days; April still gone, mysteriously remaining in Japan far beyond the three days she'd pledged; an eternity and the infinitesimal division of those days, into hours and moments and the million suppositions in a nanosecond, the nightmare thoughts that haunt days indistinct from the next, summer sun piercing the shop and the heat and the muggy, dauntless cool of the sewer pipes, extreme cold and hot. It was from this mélange that Raphael returned home from another day of work; he couldn't quite remember if it was Thursday or Friday anymore, if it was five or six in the afternoon, if it was August or September, if he himself was sixteen or seventeen anymore. They hadn't celebrated Donnie's birthday without Master Splinter nor would they have celebrated Raphael's—so the passage of time went on, in descript, without markers or ensigns on its train to make a catalogue of its movements. His life was a stream and no longer a calendar.

The night before he'd dreamed of his father holding him as a child, awoken from a nightmare—he'd always been the crybaby, it was true to the last, and unlike Leo or Donnie, he would never tough it through the night when he was five and six, and keep a brave face

the next day. He had been an honest soul, unless his loyalties called him into doubt, those interminable loyalties that tug between father and brother, between *o-tou-sama* and *o-nii-san* , between an unchanging past foundation and the unknown shadowy world of the future where father no longer exists, that place where Leo was *o-nii-sama* and the head of their family, whatever that family may become. In his dream, that conflict arose like psychic bile, and when he looked up from his father's furred chest, the familiar whiskered face morphed inexorably into Leonardo's, full-grown, with Raphael remaining himself so small and helpless—and he'd awoken, for a moment thinking with the mind of his more honest past self, ready to run to his father—then, the cold, remembrance, age and time. *You are sixteen years old, the strongest brother, nearly an adult, and you do not run to your father with your nightmares* . Then the second truth: *And even if you wanted to, he isn't here.* And Raphael's heart filled with anger at all his odd suppositions in his half-awake moments—he rolled over like the slothful teenager he rightfully was and nodded off once again, determined to forget. The dream returned, in a hundred permutations, plaguing him, and no solace for a silent mind and voiceless tongue.

The den appeared strangely quiet, even for its recent calm spell. He could not hear "kya"s from the dojo nor annoyed snipes from Don's alcove, nor the beeps and buzzes of arcade games that would indicate Mikey and Lizzie, the latter of whom he had left home for the day, as the smell of motor oil was starting to make her dizzy after long periods. He assumed his younger brother was still at a gig, so this did not appear amiss; Leo could easily be meditating, and Don could be off the line and experimenting or surfing the web. But at the same time, all this convenient silence? For a house full of teenaged boys, it was too good to be true; suspecting a plot, he didn't bother—nor dare—to begin a horror movie trope and start searching and saying "hello?" He waited, quiet as a ghost, waiting for the danger to approach and make itself apparent, sitting innocuously on the couch, playing with the remote as though toying with the idea of watching TV, with all the doubtfulness and hesitations of Hamlet for all how long he had to keep at it.

At last a memory niggled at his brain, begging attention—the van had still been in the shop when he'd left, so Mikey could not then be at a gig. Raphael began to be nervous; he scanned the den stealthily with his eyes, so as not to draw the attention of any watchers—nothing amiss that he could readily detect.

Then—the light pad of a foot—Raph was on his feet and facing the dojo, a sai at the ready—then lowered it, snarling.

Leo emerged from the now-open dojo door, arms upraised in mock surrender. "Jumpy today, little brother?"

Raph jabbed his weapon back into his belt and crossed his arms. "Damn place was silent's the grave, what'd you expect?"

Leo flashed him a secret—or was it secretive—grin, half in shadow; there was something in it, however, of sadness, and regret. He closed the dojo door behind him, almost ritualistically, his tread resigned.

"Wh—what is it?" Raphael asked, holding down an odd surge of panic. "Did—I mean—word from Master Splinter?" He could *hear* his heart speeding up, and knew Leo would have to be deaf not to hear it as well.

Leo sighed. "I—I guess you could call it that, yeah. But"—he came closer. "I mean, from here on out… you need to know a few things. Before any thing else happens. Before—I… uh… shit." His gaze fell away slightly, an uncharacteristic move, to say nothing of the swearing; Raph's eyeridges flew up slightly in apprehension, but he allowed the silence to thicken until Leonardo sliced through it again voluntarily, meeting his eyes steadily.

"Things are going to be very, very different from here on. I don't know… where it's going to lead me. But I'll… I'll never"—

A communication fought against the glass barrier of his eyes, which Raphael stared into, half mystified, half understanding.

"Leo—what the hell happened?"

Another voice, however, answered for him, from the mouth of the dojo, from which all knowledge had from the past proceeded, and in this moment altered his life forever, with the soul-saving sound, times immemorial, a voice after nightmares, the teaching whisper, the guiding hand—

"Leonardo, your time is up. I have waited long enough to see all my sons at last."

Leo didn't turn; a flash of a second while Raphael processed what he was seeing, and the communication became crystal clear, as seen through a decoder.

Time is up .

Raphael vaulted over the couch and past his brother, moving faster than he ever had in his life, towards, standing in the doorway of the dojo, the hunched, yet gentle and formidable form of his father.

" *Master Splinter* "—

A hand went up, and a command to match it, stopping Raphael in his tracks, mere feet in front of the old rat.

"Kneel, my son." It was a voice not to be argued with, and Raph did as he was beckoned, falling to his knees, fighting with his impulse to throw his arms right around his frail father and lift him off the ground with the force of his embrace. Splinter rapped his stick against the floor; dimly, Raphael became aware of several pairs of eyes—behind his father stood Mikey and Don in the dojo, watching with carefully expressionless faces—behind him, his gaze boring into his brother's shell, stood Leonardo; and above, looking silently through the second-floor railings on the ground, peeped Lizzie, her eyes enormous and full of wonder. His father walked slowly around him, appraising the damage to his carapace, tipping his face upward to

gaze at the fading, disfiguring scars over his eyes. At last Splinter spoke, while his son kneeled at his feet, his voice very stern.

"Raphael… when I first chose to guide and rear up you and your brothers, there were many things I would have liked—and needed—you to be. I had hoped I would have cautious sons, who value the worth of their own lives as precious"—here he traced with a gnarled old hand the scars on his son's brow. "I hoped I would have wise sons, who can protect the value of their lives—sons with discretion, respect, and honor of virtue, humble enough to know that a hero's death is very wrong if it takes you from your family. I had not hoped to raise protectors of the earth, or mankind—in fact, my son, I wanted only for you to live, and be happy, and have the skills to go on many, many years without your father." Here Splinter was silent for a long while, and Raphael, looking up at last, realized his father was gazing at Lizzie on the second floor, before turning his eyes on him once again.

"It would seem, then, foolish of me not to hope you would possess the very qualities that caused you to become my sons in the first place. If the world did not constantly assail you, my son—if I did not constantly fear, for you especially, that your life is ever hanging in the balance—I would want you to be first and foremost just what you are. I would wish for a brave and compassionate son, who would give his life in saving and sheltering others, who recognizes that family is a greater word than just our existence. And while you have placed yourself in unimaginable danger and have not escaped any of it unscathed, as I have taught you—I am very, very proud of you, Raphael."

Raph's body had been tense as a guitar wire until that moment; his eyes swung up to his father's, who fell with unseasoned grace to his old knees and embraced his second-youngest who, disbelievingly, embraced back, closing his eyes to hide the sudden over-brightness in them, and the sight of Leo, who had for a moment expressed a face of deep fear.

Splinter righted himself; he looked to the second floor, and beckoned to Lizzie—she withdrew quickly from sight. "It is alright, child. I am but an old rat—I will not harm you."

Raphael stood at his father's invitation, grinning. "I'll get her down in a moment—but, I mean… *how* ? Did you take ships back? Why didn't ya write?"

Leonardo answered for him, coming forward, voice very sure again. Master Splinter had made it to Japan in one piece and to the home of the Ancient One; after visiting his Master Yoshi and Tang Shen's ashes, however, he had grown severely ill, and had, in that time, chosen to let his sons use this time to work themselves out amongst one another, and come to terms with a prolonged period of their father's absence, without knowing the full cause and, through that, come to understand how they might get along without him. It was a wile scheme and certainly not in his plans when he'd left, he assured them—but lessons often appear as opportunities and make themselves known in stranger and stranger ways. April had appeared in Japan and, in concert with Casey sending her necessary information siphoned unknowingly from the turtles, sought Splinter out over weeks of trekking through Japan's mountainous regions, through small towns and hamlets. In the meanwhile she had picked up numerous antiques on order, and her wedding dress—a slim white kimono, and a bundle of plum blossoms for her hair. Splinter offered no apologies, and hoped they had gotten on quite well in his absence, adventures notwithstanding.

"And do not forget, my sons," Splinter said with an old, cunning eye, "we all need a vacation."

Splinter later met with Leonardo in a private interview requested by the latter in the dojo, which Mikey and Donnie assumed was a more thorough synopsis of their time on their own and the numerous transgressions and adventures in that interval—Raphael knew better, of course. He allowed Leo to tell his side of the story—it was the better-remembered and thus more credible version, to his

understanding, and it wouldn't be long before Splinter wanted a long ass word with them on the topic. He wasn't wrong, either. Their father retreated for a day's worth of lengthy meditation, taking only tea as sustenance—during which time Raphael shined the Nightwatcher bike and Leo sat in the shop beside him, trying his hardest to give one truly sincere chanting of the *namu Amida butsu* in a million, and so save his soul.

It was Michelangelo who came for them, oddly somber, eyes falling often on Leonardo with something like accusation. *Great—now Master Splinter has to get burdened with this crap too* , his stare said, but he found apathy. Nothing beyond this, the truth of all truths and the end of all ends. Leo continued his chant, all the way back to the den, all the way into the dojo, before the ephemeral flickering of candle flames that reminded him that all things—his youth, forbidden passion, sinful desires, the ropes that tied him to the world, the bonds that held him to corporeality, his memories and self, *this life* , this lonely existence in which so few flickers held true oneness, all accompanied by terror and greed—that all is transient, and must be so, until the end of the which has no end—time. All things pass away, and nothing is reality. And yet his heart was still not ringing pure as a clear bell with the sincerity of the *namu Amida butsu* , and no repetition of chants, no layers of worldly works, were enough to save him.

Splinter looked at them in silence for a long moment—his two sons kneeling before him, Raphael expressionless, and Leonardo murmuring fervently under his voice, as in prayer. At last he spoke, and the repetitions stopped, though he could see them running behind his best student's eyes with maddened zeal.

"Leonardo… as my student, you are the same as ever. You are just as diligent, as desirous of perfection and harmony as you ever were. This shall not change. But as my son… I am afraid I do not know what I can say to you. I trusted you with the most vulnerable member of our family—as Raphael too trusted you—for guidance and help and strength. Anything you both did in innocence, I cannot find it in

my heart to be angry for… but at thirteen, Leonardo, to force your brother into such an act with violence—I cannot believe that you did not know it to be wrong, even… evil. You were young, and did something unaccountably cruel. Yet it is your silence that concerns me, Leonardo. Four years of silence, because Raphael did not remember. You allowed his anger and confusion and never revealed the source."

"I understand, Father… I'm ready for whatever punishment you see fit to give," Leo said, humbly, his hands clasped.

Splinter watched Leo for a lengthy moment. "I have meditated long and hard on this, Leonardo. My mind wandered over many punishments… After a time, I realized that hearing this confession now changes it, though the act itself is the same. Had I heard this when you were a child, I would certainly not have punished you. While I cannot be certain of my reactions four years ago, I do know that this is—and was—a crisis for my sons, an expression of something deeply wrong. Yet now… four years have gone by. Your brother suffered and repressed this memory; you watched this, and you said *nothing* . You allowed the pain to harm him and wound him, like a knife that sinks into flesh with every passing year. No doubt you have punished and tortured yourself. And so, my student, the only punishment I can offer you for this is to do nothing."

Leo had stopped breathing several sentences ago; his entire body had gone taut and frozen, a stretched rubber band, almost quivering from the pressure.

"I… I don't understand… There has to be some way of atoning for this…"

Splinter drew up; his eyes were stern, and full of love—but the anger was apparent beneath their calm surfaces, a volcano underwater. "Only your soul can purge this darkness from itself, my student. If Raphael wishes for you to atone, he shall ask for it, and you shall grovel, until you have his forgiveness, should he choose to give it. For my part, do not think that simply because I do not offer you the

gift of a punishment, that I forgive you for abusing this family's trust, or for assaulting your brother, or for living this lie. It is quite the opposite."

Raph expected Leo to be heartbroken at this—he jumped when Leo's fists came crashing down on the table, before Leo stood, staring enraged at their father.

"Th-that's impossible! You're supposed to help me! What—what am I supposed to do?"

"Leonardo. *Suwatte kudasai. Ochitsukinasai* (Please sit down. Calm yourself,)" Splinter said, rigidly but calmly.

" *Konna toki, reisei ni nareru ka?* (You want me to be calm this time?)" Leo's voice was rising. " *Dousurebaiindayo? Ochitsukeba buji ni sumutte wake ja nai darou? Nan no imi ga aru no?* (How am I supposed to do that? You want me to calm down and meditate? And what's the point?)"

"Leo—keep a lid on it…" Raph warned, suddenly feeling the irony of the statement.

"Raphael," Splinter warned, lowly and gently. "Listen, but do not comment. I shall handle your brother."

Leo laughed. "You'll handle me? *Fuzakennjyanee yo* ! (What a fucking joke!) You can't handle me at all! *Kono baka oyaji ga nani mo shinaitte wake ka yo!? NANDA YO? SORE!!* (What can you do, you stupid old man!? WHAT'S THE POINT?!)"

Splinter stood, abruptly for his old bones, and both his sons quailed. " *SUWARE! HAJI WO SHIRE! Ima wa ore ga omae no chi-chi jyanakute, omae no SHISHOU nanda! Sono iikata wo jibun no isshou no shishou ni surunjyanai! Suware! YOKU KIKE!* (SIT DOWN! THIS IS POINTLESS! Right now I am not your father, I'm your MASTER! That is not the way you speak to your lifelong master! Sit down! LISTEN WELL!)"

Raph stared at their father's low table, the scars and tea stains, wishing fervently he didn't know Japanese, and even more fervently that he couldn't understand Leo's trash talk.

Haltingly, Leo knelt, wide-eyed. He had never been spoken to so severely by their father, and neither of them had ever seen him so angry.

" *Omae ga chanto kikeba ii* (You better listen perfectly)," Splinter went on, breathing hard and leaning on his stick. " *Jibunn no taisetsu na otouto o gorannasai* (Look at your precious younger brother.)"

" *O-tou-san* "—

" *Chichi o yobuna!* (Don't call for your father!)"

Leo's breathing was also labored; he gripped the table edge with pale green knuckles. *"Aah, sou ne. Ore no Shishou darou?* (Oh, really? So you're my master?) If you are, then you will lead me out of this darkness."

Splinter closed his eyes, his ears pressed flat against his head. "Leonardo… *ore no kokoro* …" then his eyes fell on Raphael. "My heart… is sickened and saddened for you both."

Raphael couldn't watch his father's eyes; he felt disgusting, coated in filth and slime, suddenly unworthy to stand in this room—and he didn't want to look up and find the pity there, the gentle concern, that penetrated to his soul and saw the dirt that choked him.

"Father… *O-tou-sama* ," Raph said, hesitantly. His brother and father were in Japanese mode, both able to express themselves more fully in the language as master and student—but Raph had only ever learned polite forms. If he wanted to speak completely in Japanese, he had no choice but perfect etiquette. Dojo talk. " *Mou... moushi wake arimasen ga…o… ohana shishitai k-koto ga arimasu . Kiite itadakemasen deshou ka?* (Excuse me… I have something to say. May I speak please?)"

Splinter considered him for a moment, then sat, with a smile. "My son— *jiyuu ni hanashitte kudasai* . (Please speak freely.)"

Raph took a deep breath, looking between them—his gently smiling father, and the vaguely curious, broken eyes of his older brother. Words fled from his mind; but whatever he had to say wouldn't be the same in English. It wouldn't have the same impact. He had to stand outside comfort, outside the self-defensive script he'd formulated for himself over the last four years. " *Mou kono iya na koto wo wasuremasen ka? O-nii-san ga dai suki desu* … *Mou ii desu* ... uh… *dakara* … *watashi wa daijoubu desu* … *zenzen heiki desu* . (Why do we have to do this? I love my big brother… and that's good… so… I'll be okay… you don't have to worry.)" He looked between them again, both blinking, and chuckled. "I'm gonna be okay… I'm tough, remember? Ya don't have to do this."

Splinter studied his second youngest for several moments.

"You love your brother, Raphael. If I were to punish him, what punishment would appear fair to you for what has happened?"

Raphael swallowed. "Y'know… it's funny. I think I been waitin' all my life to have the upper hand fer once… and now, when I could probably ask for Leo to have his feet licked for a week by a pack a' dogs… I don't want it. I don't want any of it. I just want my brother back. I wanna forget everything all over 'gain. That'd make everyone happy—I wouldn't care no more, and nobody'd have to deal with it. Except… except Leo. So really, I dunno what's fair. Leo's the type who's probably better at punishin' himself than anythin' we could cook up, sensei. It doesn't matter what I say. He'll never stop feelin' guilty. An' he can't take none of it back."

Splinter considered him. "Would you believe me if I told you there are some things only you can teach your brother, Raphael?"

Raphael chuckled. "The great ninjitsu lessons a' fixin' motorcycles, repairin' the sink, and the A-B-Cs a' vigilantism? Sure. I believe you, Master."

"Stop joking, Raphael," Leo ground, gripping the table hard enough to shake it. "I don't see how you can be so flippant about this. Our souls hang in the balance."

Raph cocked his head. "How else am I gonna be? You're serious 'nough fer both of us, bro. I don't want this t' be so important everything in my life comes back to it… don't want it to take over." A strange look came over his face. "I can't. Look what it does t' you… an' yer stronger'n me, Leo."

The old rat shook his head. "Raphael… I believe it is quite the contrary."

Splinter took a deep breath, closing his old eyes; he had a long, flat dagger before him, which he then, slowly, with a layer of extra meaning, slid towards Leonardo.

"Very well, then. You are an adult, as you have insisted on being long before your brothers. If you cannot purge your soul, Leonardo—then this is the only atonement I can offer you. If you would like assistance… then your father is here."

Leo stared at the dagger, fully aware of its significance; released from its wooden sheath, it gleaned with the singular beauty of a blade untested in battle, sharpened to a laser edge, milky silver, fresh from the home of the Ancient One.

"I… I know I've failed you, Master…" Leo whispered, looking deep into the blade's glimmering, virgin sheen. "I won't sully the honor of you or our family with my silence any longer. I'll do… what I should've done…"

Splinter kept his face even, but his eyes grew over-bright with tears, a shadow of disappointment; he did not stop Leonardo when his son's hand reached out, and grasped the dagger's dragon-laced black wood handle. There was an aura of watchful prayer about the old rat, emanating outward, touching his second-youngest; yet he

stood, and allowed his son, who had too long ago proclaimed himself an adult, to deal with his own soul.

But his second youngest was not the type to idly pray; Raph's hand shot out, pinning Leo's wrist to the table—brothers, they matched identical eyes, shocked and angry.

"Raph—let go of my hand."

Raphael's voice was a furious rasp, outmatching his older brother. "Who gave you permission to kill yourself? Huh? Goddamn fool."

Leo yanked; he quickly saw his mistake when Raph's other arm curved around and clutched his brother's throat down onto the table—Raph battled the dagger out of Leo's grasp then, and thrust the blade, point-first, into the tea-stained wood, and left it quivering.

" *Never* . You're not goin' nowhere—you ain't gettin' outta this all easy like that an' leavin' us high an' dry just cuz it seems too hard t' deal wi' me! I— *said* —I'd—be— *fine!* "

Leo shook his head; his jaw was quivering. "No… not you… I'm not afraid of you, little brother. I'm… afraid… of me."

Raph could barely contain his anger—he wanted to sink his fist into Leo's face, make him suffer for so much as considering suicide, and over something they did such a long time ago—over something so stupid…

"SO WHAT?! I'm 'fraid a' myself too, ya moron—ya don't see me stabbin' myself like some kinda lunatic!"

"It's…. for honor. Our family's honor—your honor"—

"HONOR ISN'T REAL!" Raph was sure his voice could be heard throughout the entire den, by Don and Mikey, but he couldn't allow himself to be concerned. "It's air—it's random thoughts floatin' through your crazy-ass skull! *I'm real!* Mikey and Don and Master

Splinter are *real!* Honor's not more important than US! Not more important than ME! You understand that? What's the *point* of honor if it can't even keep us all together?"

Leo stared; Splinter had come around the table, standing behind his second youngest, leaning heavily on his walking stick. Leo kept shaking his head, as tears found their way out of his eyes.

"Why do you keep protecting me, after what I did to you? Can't you see how much it hurts? You want to punish me by keeping me alive? That's the only punishment I won't accept."

Silently, Leo reached past him again, his hand moving toward the blade. It stopped, however, when Raphael's eyes turned glassy. Raph wrenched himself up, yanked the dagger out of the table, and flung it against the wall, making it wobble like a dart, wedged in between bricks. Leo slunk into a standing position, shocked. They were both close to crying, mirror images again; Raph turned, with a furious, strangled sob, and glared at him, daring him to point out the weakness.

"You wanna kill yourself, you gotta go through *me* ," Raphael managed, trying not to choke on his own words. "No *seppuku* in this family, 'member that? You c'n order me t' stay alive, but *you* c'n die whenever, huh? I don't freakin' think so! I don't care what dumb shit you do t' me, you're my brother an' want ya ALIVE."

Leo laughed humorlessly. "You *need* me alive. Don't confuse"—

" *No* . I *want* you alive. I c'n take care a' myself. Doesn't mean I wanna be alone."

Leo jumped, when he felt a clawed hand on his arm.

"I think," Master Splinter said, looking up at him with a small smile, "that you may have all your answers, my son."

Leo appeared incredulous. "W-what?"

"Ah, my best and most proficient student. Always the first to grasp his ninjitsu lessons. Always the first to help his brothers on the path. And the most important lesson of his life will escape him."

Leo's knees gave out; he grasped the table again, kneeling haphazardly on the tatami mat. He stared at the table; he could hear Raphael's rasping, half-sobbing breaths, and struggled to keep his face averted. The light hurt. The mats hurt. His father's voice hurt. Everything was a taunting whisper of his failure. But he felt the old rat's clawed hand, reminiscent of another era, when Leo watched his little brothers crawl into their father's lap for comfort, and would only accept a small touch himself, holding in those damaging, horror-splattered emotions until it was just he and his twin, his mirror image and narcissistic fantasy, alone.

"I'm… I'm tired," Leo gasped, shuddering. He sounded like another person; his voice no longer commanded, no longer sure, no longer unwavering, no longer *o-nii-san* .

"Leonardo… there are some lessons in your life only your brothers can teach you. This is something you know; you have always been capable of looking for the lesson in any situation. So look again now. Gaze at your brother, and stand outside of the cage you have constructed within yourself. You will see someone you do not know everything about. You will see a field of possibility, and a life that lies ahead of you. I shall not be here forever… but you have Raphael for the rest of your life—if you choose to live it."

Shaking, Leo brought his head up; Raphael had sunk onto the mats, with a hand over his eyes, taking deep breaths and stoically trying to control his own crying. Seeing his little brother's tears drip from his jaw was like realizing he'd been shipwrecked for seventeen years.

"When you returned from your pilgrimage, you did so because you believed we needed you. But you must come to understand, Leonardo—we wanted you with us long before we needed you. I have always forbid *seppuku* because it is a selfish act—because there are four of you, and such a wide world to be frightened of. I do

not wish you to be afraid of living for fear of condemnation and dishonor. Everything that you do should come back to love for your brothers… and for yourself. If you hate your own soul, you will only harm them. They want you here. And only they can show you that. Do you understand me, Leonardo?"

Leo gazed up at his sensei, then down again at his brother. The sides of his vision wavered; his world tipped and rocked, a ship under a torrent and gale. This wasn't the way of things… this wasn't the way they were supposed to be.

"No." It was the only honest answer he had. He didn't understand. His was a life of honor. Why would his family wish him to be alive after such a heinous act?

But his father's eyes remained compassionate. "My son… I cannot order you to live. In the end, you can take away only that which I have been successful in teaching you. I have failed as well… I made you believe that you could not come to me for help in the gravest matters. You still do not see why your silence was so damaging. Your brother needed help, Leonardo—as did you. And I did not know how to help you. What good am I as your father if you cannot come to me with such a dire crisis?"

"I can't come to you now," Leonardo answered, grinding his teeth. "You can't help me. Raph can't help me. I wish I were dead. And my… my little brother refuses to let me die."

"You should not look to me for punishment, Leonardo. Not when you have wronged Raphael the most."

Leo scowled. "How can you expect him to do this? He's a mess! You're the one in charge—punish me and fix him like you're supposed to!" He was on his feet again, staring into his father's eyes.

"And what is it I am meant to fix?" Splinter returned, his voice gentle and edged with danger.

Leo experienced another of those uncomfortable moments where he suddenly heard himself, echoing back into his ears. He felt more tears coming, uncontrollably, the worn mask of *o-nii-san* , the good son, the leader, slipping down. It was always Raphael that needed fixing—never himself. "I… I don't know. Just… make him stop hurting."

"You are dealing in contradictions, Leonardo. You ask me to punish you and to fix Raphael. I have no punishment to suit the crime. You seek punishment to atone, yet the only way in which you believe you can atone is through death. Yet neither your punishment nor your death will relieve the burden of pain from your brother. You are in no position to make demands. Raphael wants his older brother—and that is precisely what you shall give him. There is no door and no road out of this situation; family is compassion, but it is without mercy; your karma will decide the rest. Only by calling out to others may you be saved."

Leo had been watching Raph during his sensei's words; his brother's eyes were red, but dry—it was as though they'd traveled a thousand miles, without having gone anywhere at all.

"Your family is precious, Leonardo. And you are precious to us; we shall get through this. We shall be—as Raphael says— *okay* ."

And for the first time, Leo believed it—not because of his father's words, but something far closer. His brother, gazing at him steadily, bravely, eyes red from crying. No longer that steel of opaqueness that drove Leo to distraction—now open and sincere, challenging, the hint of an immortal smile in the corner of his mouth. The person who always had his back in battle, who would take a bisento or a bullet in the side, who, despite the scars and the gouges and the cracks, reflected back at him a world, and a dream, and a vision of hope. His friend. His partner. His twin.

Leo nodded, and his father patted his shoulder.

"Raphael and I need to talk, my son."

Leo took a shuddering breath, and nodded; over their father's shoulder, Raphael's face had changed to apprehension.

"M-Master Splinter… can't he stay"—

"Raphael! There are serious matters at hand. You need to face this as much as Leonardo—part of that necessitates not clinging to your older brother and his anger."

If Leo was honest with himself, he didn't want to leave the room anymore than Raph wanted him to. Some rather dark place in him dreaded what would be said once he left… he had to know everything Raphael felt about what had happened, and couldn't stand not being part of it, even for a second. In some way, he'd held onto the event for so long that he thoroughly believed it to be his—theirs—and something not to be shared with others. He didn't want love or vindication—he wanted punishment, and disgust, the only things he deserved. He wanted Raphael to get them too… something to drive them closer together… and as he stared at all these desires and wants, secluded in the shadows under stairs in his mind, Leo began to realize what he had become. When his mind emptied and he found peace in Buddhist chants, he had always stepped around that small, penumbra-filled place, where the broken doll with the face of his twin sat with wide, dead eyes. A place in shadows and light, where he had forced his brother on the ground, forced his fear and his anger down upon him, and nearly shattered the heart he loved more than anything—a thing made of glass, fragile bones, the taste of feathers.

How quickly hope and sunlight turned to dangerous fantasy. And knowing how much he feared it, Leo nodded, and left the room. The very act felt like one of the hardest things he had ever done—impossible to release his death grip on his twin, impossible to do the right thing, when wrong had felt… when wrong also had not been easy, when wrong opened doors in his heart, when wrong let him know joy, and youth, and something beyond, and whispered to him about the rest of his life, and how he could live it. He couldn't let

himself be trapped in that place, with a person Raphael shouldn't have to be for him.

Then Leonardo was gone, and Raphael was left staring after him. Splinter nodded and sat before his son, so they were only a foot apart, without the table between them; the formality that the room possessed with *o-nii-san* fell apart; the hierarchy that glued together their family evaporated.

"My son… my strong son. You have…" Splinter stopped, closed his eyes. These were not conversations he ever believed he would have with his sons. "You have nothing at all to be ashamed of," he said, with the voice of a father, and a father only; as though he had packed the sensei into a drawer, like *hakama* .

Raphael shuddered; visions swam before his memory, half-remembered sensations—Leonardo's callused fingers, a dense ball of heavy matter in the pit of his stomach, weighing him down, eating at him, poison and acid, like a gravitational maggot. Sentences, his thoughts, strange dust moats in his mind, the core of that time, when he'd been forced down on the ground. What strange things occurred to him, transporting him out of his body. *I like the sound of that motorcycle engine… wonder how fast it goes… that guy has relish on his hot dog… he's got a briefcase, wonder where he works… that cloud looks like a wrench, bet Donnie'd like it… that kid is talking about video games… wonder what video games Mikey's playing… That building is high—I've never jumped off a building. I wonder what the streets look like from high up… Donnie said there are gargoyles on the oldest ones. Pigeons hang out on the gargoyles. I wanna go to the top of a building just once…*

I have to get out of this.

I wanna be on the top of a building. It's such a stupid idea… but why shouldn't I?

I like the sound of that motorcycle…

I like the smell of diesel on the roads…

I like the smell of the hot dogs and puddles and that weird smell up there before it rains… I think Don called it ozone… I wish I could make a jar of ozone, or a jar of the smell of the street or the sound of the motorcycle engines…

I have to get out of this… I have to get out…

Curious, how the event was such a blur and yet he remembered his stream of consciousness so perfectly. Something about it lay at the apex of his being, swum like koi in the undercurrents of his spirit.

"I… I um… it's just… he didn't force me… not like he thinks…" Raph stammered. "I was part of it, you know? I mean… I coulda got away… I just sorta—spaced out. I dunno why. Thought about weird things, like bein' bored or somethin', 'cept I couldn't really turn it off. Like… like thinkin' about stuff I liked—stuff I really didn't know I liked—like sayin' it out loud in my head, t' myself. Stuff I wanted t' do, an' see… I, uh… is this all makin' sense?"

Splinter was very silent; his eyes had become bright, entrapped, looking at his second youngest. He had always wondered where Raphael went when his gaze traveled and he left them all behind—it seemed now he had a fraction of the answer, a small morsel to be cherished, a starving man's crumb, a vagabond's sanctuary.

"Yes, my son. It does indeed."

Raph swallowed; the filthy feeling did not diminish—to be talking about this sickening, poisoned event, to mix the bile of his stomach with the sweet memories of his father's protection, of home, motor oil into milk.

"Raphael—Leonardo has told me of the incident, but I believe you should say it, once, out loud. Tell me how you would describe it, and hear your own words. Perhaps they will reveal something about it to you."

Raph shook his head, almost too rapidly for his own comfort. "Not—ya know—without Leo here… jus' feels… wrong."

Splinter held his chin and matched their eyes. "Raphael—this is not the correct thinking. You have been trapped by this event, by striving to protect your brother. But in doing so, you have not only hurt yourself—you have greatly harmed him as well. As you have said: it was wrong to shield him. Your silence led to repression, and Leonardo was able to then keep this secret from me for many years, while you both suffered in the shadows. I know that your intentions were noble, and stemmed from deep loyalty, but this is not the first time your loyalty has been a fault rather than a virtue. It was solely to Leonardo, and not to yourself or to your family. Your loyalty caused you to mutilate your own spirit. It pains me to see my son harm himself again and again, so twisted around an event that he made himself forget. Please… drop this chain of secrets from around your neck, and open the door. You can escape from this prison through the sound of your own voice."

It was perhaps one of the first times in many years that one of his father's lessons sank to his deepest core, stirred ripples in the stagnant lake he walled inside himself, and Raphael opened his mouth to speak.

Japanese Note: These dialogue translations were actually done for me by the fabulous Airy… and at some point I lost her original English equivalents, and had to re-translate myself, and my Japanese actually isn't nearly as good as hers, so please forgive. When I find them, I will update with better inserts. Also, please note that Raphael is using VERY polite Japanese, as well as elementary; Splinter is very fluent, very officious, and rather scary; Leo's is the kind of slang a really pissed off young man would use to his father, and is also of a more fluent, native form that Raph's, obviously. The point is that Raph can hear Japanese and understand well enough, but his speaking is very limited.

Breaking the Silence

Author's Notes: Alright, boys and girls, here it is. The final chapter of WTL Sal before the epilogue. You might have all noticed a slowdown in my updates… I'm afraid that springs from a reluctance to finish this thing, as it's been my baby since last quarter. Dam 21 is also available at my website, so if you're a follower, check it out. Epilogue up soon. Please enjoy.

Life and death are but a dance of floating ash and white rose petals.

It is thoughts of this very caliber that Raphael, practical and pragmatic all his young life long, had avoided. His life was a twisted wonderland of Korn and motorcycles, slime oiling corroded metal with the slick of societal offal, brackish water glowing teal in source-less light to splash in unknown depths, minds where the brave seldom dare to dwell, residing instead in action, and the vicarious psychic sucking from a friend's normal life.

" *Hey, kiddo—what's doin'?"*

" *Giving mom back to the iron.* "

Lizzie in rags, Lizzie in a bundle of mismatched clothing, Lizzie in black, Lizzie in white—a strange young mourner and the emergence of a flower girl—the emergence of a girl at all—a girl, whom Leo had watched for a while before the start of the wedding.

" *She has to go back soon."*

Donatello's odd, protective silence.

And through the tunnels again, as from dendrite to synapse, treading mental pathways, old habits, new intentions, and all the same greater good; the endless march, and eight feet that made the journey—blessedly holding their numbers, blessedly what they were

as infants—four brothers, as they were to their father's eyes. To the eye—unbroken, whole, indescribably lucky.

" *We were—doing this thing for a long time. Seeing people kiss on the TV and outside while we collected food and stuff, y'know. It was… we didn't know what we were doing. He didn't know what he was doing."*

" *Can you honestly speak for your brother, Raphael? He cannot speak for you—though you have allowed him to for many years."*

" *I can hear him and myself, somewhere, out there. Every time I walk through the"—*

—Tunnels big enough for giant turtles, some where one must duck, others where only crawling will work. Some the size of a child, that the adult body will no longer recognize—what was once a palace has been reduced to a hermitage, illusions up in smoke.

Walking, marching here, feet that have run and kicked and trudged a thousand miles without having gone anywhere at all—these familiar tunnels, the memories of neural passageways, and into the dark of the mind they tread, past scenes of glory and remembrances of the dead.

"Comfy up there, Liz?"

The child, bundled up in fewer clothes, sitting atop his shell, with a stoic thumbs up, a confirmation of silence.

" *Why would you waste away in silence like this, my son? Why did you feel you could not talk to me?"*

" *I was just as much a part of it as he was. It wasn't right—to make myself out to be the victim. Not unless he wanted to come clean too."*

" *I am afraid I do not understand, Raphael. You do not see how this has harmed you?"*

" *It made me stronger."*

" *My son, please"—*

—Continue through the maze of realizations, the blossoming of conscious life, regrets sowed like dragon's teeth in the iron and steel, rotting away under years of mal-use. There are smells and visions, a map of cognitive patterning, a spider web of mental processing, that heralds the beginning of the conscious life. Were Leonardo to close his eyes, this passage would lead him to a moment of light, and the flight of birds, a single disease-infested feather, brown eyes swallowing the sun, open hands to catch untamable illumination. The seeds of a wanting and an understanding for something outside of himself, to integrate into his being, the hunger for knowledge, for ownership—the need to conquer that for some extends over women, experience, land—but for him, only this, the cell of being just outside his permeable walls, connected and sharing through cyclical osmosis, the melting surface of the mirror with himself, his shadow and his skin, at once meld, on the planes of the brain. A touch of the lips, and the spontaneous pyrotechnics of his awake existence, irrevocable, part of his integral make-up, never to be erased, stamped on his taste buds.

" *I—we—well, he didn't know I saw—this news thing when we got grounded or somethin', about these boys who got separated for this kinda stuff—so, later—I brought up that maybe we should stop. I didn't want him to get in trouble—I mean, he's oldest, he'd get the worst of it, no matter what—or that's the way I was thinkin', at least."*

" *I would never have been angry for what the two of you were doing, Raphael. I… I cannot tell you how I would have reacted, but not anger to innocence, not punishment for ignorance."*

" *How ignorant did you think we were?"*

" *I think you were more ignorant than your brother."*

" *And… and if I teased him? What if I liked him always wanting me around, me in particular, me for something I had and the others didn't. I've never had anything about me that was… I dunno."*

" *Raphael… that only serves to tell me how much more ignorant than your brother you were, then and even now. You do not even know your own worth."*

" *What if I deserved it?"*

" *Do not pause there, Raphael. You may discover more, as you keep"—*

—Going, through the cardiovascular systems that unknowingly lace the largest city in the world, feed it and make it possible, take away its wastes and assuage its rivers.

The truth in life is that it is without resolution. We believe the ashes over our fireplaces signify an end, and as they filter over the ocean or into the wind, dust over the ground, that they are somehow different from the rose petals adorning the start of new life, the dusting in a new bride's hair, flying through the air to the next wife, to the next family—to the next, to the next, to the next. Donatello knew these assumptions to be false—that one life is equal to another, and ceremony is empty of the ability to cure us—that mere words and air are not the ingredients of remedy. What possessed him then, standing over Kristen Roberts, a stunted ten-year-old, pondering the mystery of the universe at three in the morning overlooking a massive sewer junction, and watching, through an eerie incandescent light glancing off poisoned water, a thin trail like dust moats falling and disappearing, genetic properties lost—when light caught them, the specks took on the aspect of constellations, faraway stars, matter once close to their bosom in a gravitational oneness, and in similitude they were as brothers.

His brothers knew nothing of it—only the pile of empty, newly cleaned Petri dishes and vials beside the sink, mysterious and without the empty air of explanation. While ceremony dictates words be spoken at a vigil, neither he or Lizzie said a thing—it lay between them, a secret, silent as the deep, open maw that served as Daphne Roberts's tomb. They held their solitary funeral—before he picked her up, and she sat on his shoulder quietly back to the lair. Ashes, fertilization for mold and the worms, slithering through the dirt. The dead have not eyes, nor ears—where they fall and where they rest, the words that we speak and the gestures we make, matter not. The funeral is for the living.

" *We argued—um, we fought—I… I don't… this part is still kinda messed up, I can't get the order right."*

" *Take your time, my son."*

" *Time… heh. Yeah. I keep thinkin' bout that. Seems like it took thirty seconds. I spend twice's long brushin' my teeth every morning, and again at night. I spend a good three minutes eatin' cereal every morning—but I don't remember every time I ever brushed my teeth or ate breakfast—so why is this so important? There are so many thirty seconds in my life… why is this one so important ?"*

" *I wish I had an answer for you, Raphael. It is there, inside your mind, and not here with me—there, and there only, will you find the root, and rip it out if you must. Your words are the stem with which you grip—through your mouth, as from the soil, it comes, harvested and wrestled away from you."*

" *Well, I—I think I said somethin' that ticked him off… we were rolling"—*

—Around the world it turns, this cloak of silence, the implicit that lives in religion and culture, the things that are never spoken and ever taken for granted. Only those standing on the outside are truly aware of them, perhaps in disdain, or tinged with envy.

They all joked that it had been more like Mikey giving April away to Casey who Raphael gave away—reluctantly. A ceremony of white petals and an ocean of gauze, over the floor, a flawless shroud, while from Lizzie's little fingers a newborn set of constellations sparked out, floating down as slow-moving shooting stars to the ground, roses doomed to wilt.

April was beautiful—she and Lizzie, red heads in matching off-white and champagne, and their imperfections complemented them in the dank underground where stark faultlessness would have made them crass, inhuman, and grotesque. She and Casey signed their marriage certificate there—it was not yet filed and notarized, yet the paper seemed too light, when it should have been weighted by blocks of steel despite all appearances—mere origami paper, little different from wood and ash—and so the moment when they were actually man and wife remained a question for great philosophers. She and Casey danced, Raphael got a turn, laughing and awkward, Splinter snuck cake while Don chased Leo off the dinner he was preparing, and Michelangelo, now devoid of one sister, sat watching with Lizzie, sitting perched on the back of the couch—both munching cake and silent.

Michelangelo's conscious life had begun perhaps the first time his father had struck him, but it was not the pain or the shock that awoke that flourishing, tiny adult down within his heart. He had lived entirely and comfortably inside his own skin until that moment, happy and outgoing and adventurous, devoid of consequences or conscience, absent of cause-and-effect relationships. He had this one time played a game and wounded a brother in an inexcusable manner, and deserved his father's punishment—but it had pounded into him an understanding, the thread between an action and the harm it can cause, reverberating onward into forever. The next and the next and the next.

A wedding is an empty catalyst that sanctions a reality that will occur no matter what—it is, like words on paper, an attempt to control and catalogue the uncontrollable. It is a nod to generations to come, to

help them trace themselves backwards, into the roots that lace the world; it is, therefore, not for the living at all, but for those who have and will live, in times to come.

" *We were rolling around and fighting, and I thought we were playin' cuz we always did that, wrestled and sparred for no reason—then he had my arms over my head an' I was on my shell—an' I… I think I laughed for some dumb reason… and he… his face was different. I could tell. I'd… well, I'd seen him like that before, but it never scared me like that—but I coulda moved, I think I coulda got him off—but my brain… my thoughts… everything. I didn't think about it anymore. I don't even know if I was there."*

Trudging, through darkness—until, at last, light—the opening, the shape of the sun, into the world above, letting down a circle spotlight into their kingdom, and up, blinking, into a trash and glass-strewn alleyway, the speckles clinking and catching illumination, fallen in trails like constellations at their feet.

Across the street from the mouth of the alley lay a red brick building with a short set of stairs from the sidewalk. Leo checked a small post-it in his hand.

"This's the place—April said she phoned ahead. A Mrs. Gibbons from Georgia will be here today to pick you up."

Michelangelo swallowed; his voice came out hoarse but chipper. "Your grandma, right, dudette?"

Lizzie—for this, in the alley, was the last place she could be Lizzie, and not the human ten-year-old Kristen Roberts—shrugged. "Never met."

Donatello spoke from the shadows, leaning against a wall with his arms folded. "She's your maternal grandmother, 56 years old, a manager of a grocery store, and apparently in good health. Your only relative they could find, based on your mother's information."

Again, Lizzie shrugged. She had ridden in on Raphael's shoulder, but now stood on the ground in close proximity to Michelangelo, while Raph, near the mouth of the alley, stood checking out the building with it's worn old sign, funded by limited government funds and even less care.

Manhattan Branch Social Services.

" *He held me down."*

" *Go on, my son."*

It was a gateway to all the privileges of a human citizen—to school and daylight and walking in the open, brazen and invisible, a life without fear—or the fear the brothers had grown accustomed to. It was also a shedding of a cloak, of a certain protection, of a nameless freedom—but Kristen Roberts was too young to choose their life, and her face and body was one that had a choice. Her mind hid under a mask that could conform.

And if she ever chose differently—well, they would remain the denizens of the shadows, the Hamato family, waiting for her in the hidden pathways of the mind, a dream and a promise from childhood.

They were a united whole to her eye alone as she hugged each of them in turn, lingering on Raphael, and made her way across the street, making it across the expanse without looking back, as a journeyman from the Underworld. Her tiny legs plodding up the steps, stolid, one foot in front of the other.

" *Keep going, Raphael. Keep speaking. Do not be silent."*

" *And he… um…well… Christ, do I have to say it?"*

" *I think it is for the best that you do."*

" *He um… he touched me, okay? Thirty seconds, maybe a minute, I dunno—but that's all he did, I swear. Then I… kinda came back to myself while he was doing it. I mean.. it's just that I didn't want him to, not like it didn't… like it hurt or anything. He didn't hurt me. But I always told him I didn't want to… do— that . And he…he made me do it anyways. And I kinda got that he could do that… that I didn't have to want it, he could do it anyways and that's the way things were. And I've spent… God, four years trying to show him that he can't."*

" *Raphael."*

"Raphael."

Raph was the first one turning away, unable to watch any longer—but Leo caught his arm, and he turned, to catch Lizzie at the door, looking back into the shadows at them. It was the first time they had ever seen her in the sunlight, the color of the child's skin, once obscured by blood, dirt and grime, the hanging strands of her hair—now glancing copper in the glaring brightness above ground. Her hand rested on the doorknob, and some veil faded from around her eyes—as she gazed back, she suddenly smiled, as flashing bright as the sun itself—

" *I can hear him and myself, somewhere, from out there, when I walk through the tunnels."*

A truck passed.

She was gone.

" *We're still there, father. I'm still there."*

Raphael turned hurriedly, avoiding eyes, without letting anyone see his face—into the sewers, and within minutes Leo followed him, with a glance at his other brothers. Donatello lingered in the shadows for a long while, his eye line indiscernible. He did not seem to be waiting, and finally languidly righted himself.

"Don."

Donnie turned to his youngest brother. "Yeah, Mikey?"

"D'you think… I mean, she'll be okay, right?"

Donnie actually laughed, low and strong. "She survived everything else, didn't she? Besides… she'll be back. Freedom and namelessness are drugs, little bro."

Michelangelo didn't answer. He remained leaning with his left shoulder just at the edges of shadow and light, where his world ended and theirs began, long after there was anything exciting to look at. It was no empty vigil or ceremony—nothing anyone would spread ashes or flowers for, no harbinger—just a bridge. It was like watching a tiny piece of himself—a little child crossing the street—his childhood—passing away from him, gone like birds into the air.

Michelangelo remained, watching the emptiness where a little girl had stood, alone, pondering the constellations of his lifetime, the fallen star of his younger self. He was seventeen.

The silence was suffocating.

Epilogue: Unattainable Light

When Raphael Hamato was seven, he had a bird named Jay; utilizing a power he knew nothing about and never saw as virtue, he patiently bandaged, fed, and nurtured it back to health. After a month if perched in the cup o his mutant hands and sat quite happily upon his small shoulder or the curve of his carapace, accepting tiny chunks of bread and steamed rice from his fingers. He could splay the animal's wings and examine the feathers with interest, watch him flap and make small flights through tunnels that lasted a dozen feet at a time, and observe the way the air flowed over and under each plume, study the jerky movements of Jay's little head and the way it watched with its beady black eyes, confused in the deep subterranean underground. After some time, however, Jay stopped attempting to catch worms and insects from its surroundings and came to rely on the bits of carbohydrate fed to it by it's caretaker; and it was at this that Splinter decided the time had come to let the bird go.

He knew his temperamental son well, felt anxiety at the reaction he could show at the removal of his one friend, and approached the situation with the delicate sense of the slinking rat feeling out a dangerous alley. He sat his son down with him while conducting dinner preparations, when it was Raphael's turn to assist with the night's meal; while Leonardo sat watching his brothers collecting items for a new invention outside the lair, Splinter handed Raphael some freshly dried teas and set him to work grinding while water began boiling over the fire.

"My son. You know where birds come from, do you not?"

The bird in question sat perched on his child's carapace at the moment; Raphael glanced at it and back to his father, nodding mutely, as though he did not quite understand the efficacy of such a question.

"How has your pet's flying been?"

Raphael looked at him with wide, clear eyes, and spoke, utterly surprising his father with that sometimes wise seven-year-old voice.

"He doesn't. Gotta let him go tomorrow before he forgets."

Splinter blinked, taken very much aback. "No fight, my son? You do not wish to keep you pet with you? You shall not miss him?"

Raphael appeared confused. "Doesn't matter. He's supposed to fly. Can't fly in the sewer."

Splinter reached out, and clasped his son's other shoulder, while Jay cocked his feathery head curiously. "Raphael… it is acceptable to miss your pet. It is acceptable to mourn that you must be separated because he belongs to the world above us, and we here. This bird is your friend."

Raphael's eyes remained wide and sensible. "I like him. He's a bird. Supposed to fly. He doesn't belong here with us."

Splinter looked hard at his son, gazed deeply for some manifest trace of the child that he knew lay locked behind that backward pragmatism.

"And you, my son? You have no thoughts of not belonging here, in the darkness? You do not wish to fly yourself?"

Raphael frowned, troubled—he was not an imaginative child, and sometimes grew annoyed by the fantasticality of others, because he could not understand it—these things were worthless endeavors to him, circular conversations, pointless pursuits that only resulted in pain, the yearning for the unattainable known to a poor existence and, for him, to be avoided. For now, in any case. He had not yet a taste of the above world—he had not the taste of wanting, nor did his brothers—not fully. They rested on that cusp of envy and desire, and Splinter, wise though he was, could not beat it back. He wanted to

see light in his sons' eyes, and hope, and the desire to be more; but not at the price of their innocence and happiness.

"Master Splinter," Raphael said, with his strong little voice, "I'm a turtle. Turtles aren't birds. Turtles don't fly."

It was one of many truths Splinter should have been happy to see instilled in his son, for it would save his young life… instead, it only filled the old rat with an indescribably feeling of heartbreak and loss.

A whisper from childhood, round and dark like a shadowed sun—a ball of feathers trapped inside a miniscule pipe into which only a child's hands may reach.

" *What is it?"*

" *It's a bug!"*

" *It's not an insect, Mikey—it's avian."*

" *A bee? A bee's a bug."*

" *Maybe it's a bird, Mikey."*

" *I think Raphi's right."*

" *Yeah, Leo—it's called a pigeon."*

Leonardo grabbed a stick; both Mikey and Don were already poking implements into the pipe, while Raphael hung back, wide-eyed. Mikey looked back at him.

" *Raphi, better run—it might still be a bug!"*

Donnie hit him with his stick. "It's not a bug, told you fifty billion times!"

Raphael wandered closer, looking at the stick in Leo's hands.

" *So it's not a bug?"*

Leo shrugged. "Dunno—Donnie's head's in the way."

Mikey giggled. "Haha, Donnie's a fathead!"

Raphael pushed past him, to reach his small hands in the pipe towards the trembling animal. Barely a second later he drew back.

" *Got me."*

Mikey came forward. "Whatcha doin' with it?"

Raphael reached back in, and at last wrestled the little struggling creature out.

" *Got somethin' broken. Donnie, fix?" He held the creature out like a broken toy.*

Donnie backed away. "No way! Master Splinter says they have sickness and stuff. Put it down, Raphi!"

Leonardo frowned, stepped forward, and finally spoke up. "He can keep it 'till I say, okay, Donnie? Let's go ask Master Splinter, Raphi." And without further ado, he grabbed his younger brother's arm, and away they went as a troupe, a disgruntled Donnie trailing in the back.

They were a troupe again, trailing along a pipe, four turtles and a bird following an old rat like so many ducklings, a line of the lost, chipping along at a happy pace below and unknown to the rushing denizens just above them. They passed grilles, the sound of *clum-clacking* high-heeled feet, the heavy rushing steps of business men, the whir of skateboard wheels, the heady rush of cars, the smell of ozone, motor oil, diesel fuel, and hot dogs, tickling hungry stomachs. Leonardo hung back, and walked beside Raphael, gazing at him for a long few minutes before deciding to speak.

"Raphi— *Naze ga nakanaide irunda ka?* " (Why aren't you crying?)

Raph pretended not to understand him. Leo persisted, as he was wont to do, repeating himself.

"We're letting the bird go. Aren't you sad? Why no tears, huh?"

Raphael looked down at Jay and then at his brother. "Why should I be sad? He's gonna fly again. That's what I wanted."

Leo made a frustrated expression. "Stop acting stupid—you know what I mean! Don't you want to keep him with you?"

Raphael frowned. "He doesn't belong here. It's a sewer. Birds don't live in sewers, Leo. Why're *you* acting stupid?"

Leo's whisper was hoarse. "It doesn't make sense. You should at least be sad—you cry about *everything* , and now you have a good excuse, and nothing. I don't get it."

"You hate it when I cry—aren't you happy that I'm not?" Raph asked with a bite but rather logically. "You *wanna* see me cry or something?"

Leo was silent, and they walked on in angry quietude. One could nearly hear Mikey and Donnie exchange a glance from behind them.

Leo supposed he expected fireworks when they finally set this bird, who had been a member of their household—ate from their hands and slept in the crook of Raphael's neck—free. He expected Raphael to utterly and completely break down. He expected Mikey to shed a tear, a speech from Master Splinter, for Donnie to look away theatrically.

But this is the way of life. It is without true order and chronology—it does not sweep up from exposition, climax into an apex of pleasure, and slide down again into resolution. There are no deathbed confessions, and no goodbyes where one truly believes that they will never meet again. This is the stuff of narration, of life as it *should* be. Leonardo read books with missing pages; he searched for dogmatic

truth, for honor, for ideals, for the sheets that would give resolution, completion, to the fleeting mirage of images, the broken slideshow, of his conscious life.

Conscious life.

Consciousness began for Leo that day, as his brother strode forward, and opened his hands towards a square of light, and the bird, for several moments, went absolutely nowhere. It sat as though confused, unaware that this was its moment, the call to stage, its cue to life, and yet it sat in the hands of a tiny mutant—at home. After a moment, Jay hopped up on the grille, curiously, and Raphael watched it, expressionless.

Anticlimactic at best. But delayed reaction set in, and Leo watched this scene as though outside his body—at once, Jay took flight, and Raphael, after a moment blinking, took off running to see him as he went, and the family followed behind, slowly.

A few grilles down Raphael stopped, bathed in the late afternoon glow, shadows flitting over him—the silhouettes of pigeons against a great star in an alien sky. Raphael jumped, and caught the bars, as close as possible to the world above—and it was a moment before Splinter admonished him. Leonardo and Michelangelo's minds both had a permanent snapshot, burned into their brains, their most vulnerable, most ordinary, and somehow, only then, most amazing brother.

Flitting shadows, the impression, bright as a flash on film, deep blacks and whites—deepening the shadows, the spider web tendrils at the corner of sight, creeping upon one like poison, and that square, imperceptible, unattainable—

Raphael, gazing into the sun, light reflecting amber into his eyes, where reflected birds in everlasting flight.

A truck passed over.

It was gone.

-End-

Author's Notes::Cries::… Well, that's the end of Walking the Line: Salvation. I'm a little emotional right now. In any case… if there're any of you out there who have been sticking with this whole monster of a fic… now's the time to say something. Please, please, PLEASE, whether you think you have something intelligent to say or not, please say SOMETHING after you're done reading this. I have put a lot of effort into this fic and trying always to update in timely fashions, UCLA sessions notwithstanding, and it has come in at over a hundred thousand words. So. Please tell me what you thought other than "wow" or "hi," lol. WTL Damnation will, however, continue a bit longer.

Thanks to everyone for reading and special thanks go to: Kytyngurl2 for her constant assistance, Tori Angeli for always whipping me into shape, Winny for her cheerleading and ideas, and especially Airy and Tri for reviews, fanart, love, and translations. I'll be back. I have lots left in the larder.

--Aub